From the Bleachers

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From the Bleachers

by Ryumako

Summary

("American-based" regular high school AU) Ryuko Matoi is center snare at her local high school, just starting out her junior year with her best friend Nonon Jakuzure, the drum major. The school year seemed like it was going to be pretty boring - until she started talking to varsity cheerleader Mako Mankanshoku. Just as Ryuko starts to think she really might like this girl, quarterback Ira Gamagoori asks her out! How will they deal with this development?

A riveting story full of romantic cliches, except now the cliches are gay. The last chapter is OPTIONAL TO READ and EXPLICIT.

Notes

Hey everyone!! February's ryumako fic will be multi-chapter! Not sure how many chapters yet, exactly. I really hope you enjoy - I've never written an AU before!

Just a quick note - I've dropped the "-chan" honorific from Mako's dialogue, because I feel it would be inconsistent with the American-based high school. Also, I'm not totally positive, but I think Satsuki might make a later appearance, but I'm not positive yet.

PLEASE tell me what you think!! Your feedback will be great motivation for me to work better and faster.

Chapter 1: Impressions

Ryuko was not necessarily thrilled at the prospect of starting her junior year in high school. As far as she was concerned, four years in a place like this were far too many. The fact that she was so sick of it already made her feel even more sorry for herself, considering this was only her third year. Still, she sucked it up and got in her car to leave. Surely there would be something about this year that could make it tolerable.

Her first hour of the day was band. Ryuko loved band; it not only gave her something to do after school besides sitting at home, but it also gave her something to work at. Plus, she had a few friends in her section –the percussion section. She was center snare herself, a fact she took a lot of pride in.

However, her closest friend was one of the drum majors. She wouldn't go as far to say that they were best friends, but they were pretty close. Her name was Nonon. It was funny how they became friends, because they used to pretty much hate each other due to their hardcore competitiveness. In the music world, competitiveness was something that flourished among the passionate and the talented.

Nonon used to be part of the percussion section (she had played tenor), which is how she had become acquainted with Ryuko in the first place. Ryuko didn't like how bossy and stuck up she was, and Nonon didn't like Ryuko's cocky attitude. Eventually, however, with enough sectionals they were both able to find quite a bit of similarities in each other and the tension sooner or later dropped altogether. They started hanging out outside of practice, and really got to know each other better. With that cutthroat competitive air no longer between them, Nonon thought it alright to go out for drum major that year instead –something she'd always wanted to do.

The first day of band class went by rather smoothly; they went over a lot of basic warm-ups, and the director even introduced Nonon to the band as one of their drum majors alongside another two, to which Ryuko gave her a thumbs-up and a flashy grin. The pink haired girl even got the opportunity to conduct the band for the first time, except she was really, really short, so it was a little difficult for her to see over the podium, which everyone found comical. Nonon did not.

The rest of Ryuko's day dulled in comparison. Her current schedule didn't even have a free hour, and a lot of her classes were really boring, as usual. The only class besides band she found herself enjoying enough to be mentioned was anatomy, and not even because she liked anatomy –she didn't. It was because the teacher was good, and because the students were lively and it created a relaxed and fun atmosphere in the classroom. It was refreshing.

The following weekdays felt like copies of one another, one after the other with nothing significant to note. This is an okay feeling to her, because she felt like time was going faster when all the days blended together. The only thing she looked forward to was that Friday, when the band already had a football game to play at.

Ryuko absolutely *loved* playing at football games, where other band members were never too excited. She liked the energy, the crowd, being outside at night, and drumming for and in front of other people. Truly, she knew this would be her favorite high school pastime, alongside marching band (which was kind of the same deal considering they also performed during halftime).

Finally, Friday night rolled around and it was time to prepare for the game. Ryuko was always early, because she liked to get suited up in her uniform before the other band members got in her way. Nonon met her there too, because she was the same way. As they were getting dressed, they maintained light conversation.

“How was your first week?” Nonon asked casually.

“Pretty boring,” Ryuko answered. “Looks like it’s gonna be another totally unmemorable year.”

“Hey, don’t say that, I’m sure something interesting will happen!” She supported.

The taller teen looked at her skeptically with one leg in her uniform’s pants. “What could possibly happen to make it even a little notable?”

“Ah, I don’t know!” She said. “Maybe we’ll actually win some awards competing this year.”

At that, Ryuko laughed genuinely. “Yeah, maybe,” She said sarcastically. Nonon rolled her eyes, but had no further comment.

Soon enough, the whole band room was flooded with more members. Ryuko was already ready by then, and decided to take her snare drum outside and get ready to line up with the rest of the band. She was standing there for only a few minutes, practicing as quietly as one can practice on a marching snare, until Nonon approached her again, all dressed in her special drum major’s uniform.

“You ready for this?” Nonon asked. Ryuko sheathed her sticks.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like we get to perform at halftime yet –we’ve just started getting our charts for the show, so. This is practically just pep band right now.” She looked down at her drum, tapping it idly.

“No reason to be so pessimistic, pep band’s fun, too,” She spoke. Ryuko agreed genuinely, but her following nod seemed quite a bit halfhearted.

Soon enough, the band was marching to the field to do pregame. Ryuko had to be alert during this time, because she was the one doing the taps to keep the band in step; she had to be very consistent. Pregame ended up going off without a hitch, and the band gathered into their designated section of the bleachers to watch the game until they were called upon again to play.

During this time, there was a whole lot of nothing to do, unless you were into football – Ryuko wasn’t. Well, not really. It could be entertaining to watch, especially when the players

got injured. Or at least, she thought so. Usually, though, she just sat around and talked to Nonon, if she wasn't hanging with any of her other friends in the band.

In tonight's game though, it looked like her friend had decided to join her. They watched the team get ready to kick off. Ryuko noticed the cheerleaders casually shuffling onto the track, likely preparing to get into formation. For a moment, she kind of spaced out watching them shuffle about, not really thinking much besides 'nice'.

"You are literally so gay," Nonon said, startling her slightly.

Ryuko looked to her with an accusatory expression. "And you're not?"

"Besides the point," She said. "You're totally not being subtle."

"Why should I be subtle?" She asked rhetorically, and then looked back towards the cheerleaders. There were a good number of them, and they all looked very similar to each other, the only notable difference being maybe hair color. But then one of them in particular caught her eye –her hair was shorter than all the rest of the girl's, and she was practically jumping up and down with excitement.

"Hey," Ryuko spoke up again, gaining Nonon's attention. "What's that girl's name?"

"Which one?" She also looked toward the girls.

"The one with the short hair," She said. And in case that wasn't enough, she added, "She's bouncing."

"Ooh, Mako?" Nonon said. "Yeah, Mako Mankanshoku. She's…something. Why?"

"We've got anatomy together," She told her. "Anyway, I never got around to learning her name. She's one of the only people in that class who's quiet…well, usually she's asleep, I've noticed…but I was just surprised to see her so…peppy."

"Are you kidding? Have you ever talked to her?" She spoke incredulously. "She's the epitome of pep! It's a bit overbearing, actually. I've only talked to her maybe a handful of times, yet she always wants to hug me," She explained. "She wants to hug everyone, it seems. She makes a good cheerleader." She scoffed.

Ryuko looked at her friend, taking in her explanation of her character. She then looked back at this Mako girl, and then responded late, "No, I've never talked to her…" As she watched her, the girl got somewhere in the middle of the other girls, and then it seemed like she was trying to give them some sort of…pep talk. Because her voice was so loud, she could hear her, but only in bits and pieces. Some of the cheerleaders looked like they were used to it, where others looked visibly annoyed. Ryuko frowned. "Do people not like her?"

"I don't think it's so much that, rather that people don't really pay that much attention to her," Nonon explained. She knew how that felt. "I mean, she's a *cheerleader*, so people generally know about her, at least…I'm surprised you didn't. She's in our graduating class, where've

you been?" Ryuko deadpanned and then shoved her teasingly. "Anyway," Nonon continued. "Why the sudden interest?" She asked with a blatantly suggestive expression.

"She stood out to me," She explained, ignoring what she was implying.

"Well, be careful," She spoke, and she looked to her. "Not too many cheerleaders aren't straight."

Ryuko raised her eyebrows. "I haven't even talked to her, what makes you think I'm interested in her like that?"

"The way you're looking at her," Nonon replied honestly.

"That doesn't mean anything," She stated without faltering. Before she had a chance to say anything else on the subject, she continued, "Oh, look, I have to play now. That means *you* have to conduct." She smiled falsely. The shorter girl just gave her a look, and then got up to do her thing.

Ryuko stood up from the bleachers and the followed the rest of the percussion section down to the track. She stepped in front of her respective snare, which was on a stand, and then looked toward Nonon for the cue. She unsheathed her sticks and then their school song started, and she went into autopilot, playing it from memory like the whole band was required to.

She wore a blank face as she looked at nothing in particular and simply played her drum, until she noticed Mako looking at her, her expression one of awe, even. Ryuko looked back at her, mildly surprised, and then the girl smiled at her. She smiled back for the sake of friendliness, and then averted her eyes awkwardly and didn't look that way again until she heard their cheer start.

Chapter 2: Anatomy

Chapter Summary

Ryuko and Mako finally get acquainted!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, Ryuko woke up in a better mood than usual, which was saying a lot, because waking up for school will leave anyone feeling just abysmal. She couldn't really put her finger on why, but she was feeling hopeful about the school year after all. Maybe Nonon's casual optimism was rubbing off on her…which was unusual in itself, because Nonon was usually also relatively pessimistic.

Her day was neither good nor bad: in band, the director announced that they finally had just enough drill rehearsed to be able to perform the opener of their show at least decently at that Friday's football game. It was nice, because it gave her something to look forward to. By the time she got to anatomy class, she was feeling pretty good.

"Alright class," the teacher said, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. "As you may be aware, today we'll be taking each other's pulse and finding blood pressure as part of our cardiology unit." He walked to his desk and picked up a stack of papers, and then started passing them out: the corresponding worksheets. "Well, find a partner!"

Ryuko quickly looked around, and then remembered she didn't have any decent friends in that class. She didn't worry about it though; she took out her phone and messed with it until she was forcibly assigned a partner who also had no other options.

"Hello!" Sounded a high-pitched voice suddenly. "Do you have a partner?"

"Uh, no, I-" Ryuko started as she looked up from her phone. It was that girl named Mako standing in front of her desk. "No, I don't."

"Can I be your partner then?" She smiled real big. Everyone around her had already paired up.

"Sure," She agreed. "Uh, I'm Ryuko."

"Oh, I know!" She said. "Ryuko Matoi, right? You play the snare drum in the band!"

"That's right," She replied proudly. For some reason she was touched that she recognized her from the band, and even knew her name. She supposed it only made sense, though.

“Well, I’m Mako,” She extended her hand. “Mako Mankanshoku. And I’m not very good at anatomy!”

Ryuko smiled at her, and then slapped her hand into hers firmly and shook it. “Me neither.” That was relieving; she didn’t want to look stupid in comparison.

The teacher cleared his throat, “All the instructions are there on your worksheets, and they’re very thorough –follow them carefully! Each pair is going to need a stethoscope and a sphygmomanometer,” He instructed. The class stared at him blankly. “Blood pressure cuff,” He clarified. “The required supplies are all on the back table.”

“I’ll go get those things.” Ryuko volunteered. “Maybe you could start to try and make some sense of that worksheet.”

“Mm!” Mako agreed, nodding succinctly.

Ryuko took the short trip to the back table, and then walked back to her table, both items of equipment in hand. There, she found Mako staring very intently at the worksheet, the paper a mere inch from her face. Her expression changed to one of mutual confusion.

“Alright, so what do we do first?” Ryuko asked, setting down the tools.

“I…am not sure.” She looked toward her, smiling despite her uncertainty.

“Okay, well, let me take a look.” She picked up her own paper and read the first instruction. It said that their first task was blood pressure, so Ryuko picked up the sphygmomano-whatever. Alright, so the second instruction then…

“Alright, so, it looks like I have to wrap this cuff around your arm, and then…squeeze this thingy?” She said, holding the little bulb in her hand and looking at it.

“Ooh, ooh! My dad’s a doctor -I think I’ve seen him do this before!” Mako said enthusiastically.

“So, would you rather take my blood pressure first, then?” She looked to her, honestly hoping she wouldn’t have to go first. She felt thankful that at least one of them had some semblance of an idea about how to proceed with this.

“Sure!” She reached over and took the device from Ryuko. “Um, you’re going to need to roll up your sleeve or take off your jacket so I can access your arm.”

“Oh, of course,” Ryuko said, taking off her letterman jacket without a second thought and placing it on the back of her chair. Underneath, she was wearing a white t-shirt with the logo of one of the many bands she liked on it. “What now?”

“I guess you could sit on the table here so I can see your arm,” Mako suggested. She looked toward the device briefly, and then sat on the table, scooting back a bit on its surface so she was comfortable. Then, she looked to Mako to see what she would do next.

Without further instruction, the shorter girl lifted Ryuko's arm by the elbow a bit, and then gently pushed her sleeve up so it was over her shoulder. It was easily noticeable that Ryuko worked out or *something*, because her bicep was a bit impressive. The younger teen stared, and then absentmindedly brushed her fingers over the skin of her upper arm as her hand left her sleeve. Ryuko had been watching her movements with relative interest, and when she did this, she got light goose bumps.

"Oh, sorry! I…anyway, I'm going to wrap this cuff around your arm now, okay?" She interrupted herself, her tone bouncing back to cheeriness. Ryuko nodded slowly, staring at her a little taken aback, but the girl refused to make eye contact. She noticed a very faint blush, but didn't think much of it.

Mako's expression then changed to one of determination and focus as she wrapped the device around her upper arm, just an inch above her inner elbow. Then, she picked up the stethoscope from the table and put it in her ears. She took the bell of the device and slid it just below the cuff's edge. "Okay," She said, now that she was ready. "I'm gonna start squeezing the squeezy bit now –it's gonna get a bit tight." Ryuko nodded.

Mako then started rapidly pumping up the sphygmomanometer, and it definitely did get squeezy. She then allowed it to slowly release air as she watched the dial. "117…" She muttered. "Over 75. That's normal! Congratulations!"

"Oh, what a relief," Ryuko said somewhat sarcastically, causing the other teen to chuckle. As she released her arm and undid the velcro, she picked up her pencil and wrote the fraction in the appropriate blank on her worksheet. "I suppose it's your turn." Ryuko smiled.

"Mhm!" She said, promptly hopping onto the table and holding out her arm, nice and ready. She was a bit taken aback by her eagerness, but found it interesting. She probably just wanted to get the assignment finished, she figured.

"So I just…" Ryuko began. "Wrap this around here…" She mumbled as she strapped it around her upper arm like she had done to her, "and then squeeze this little thing?"

"Yep! Squeeze it until it inflates, and then let the air escape. Listen through the stethyscope," She instructed, mispronouncing 'stethoscope' slightly (Ryuko wondered if she did this on purpose), "and watch the gauge –that's what tells the blood pressure."

"Oh! Alright," She said gladly, realizing how easy it actually was. "Here goes."

It only took a moment, but as she started inflating the device, and because of her attentiveness, she couldn't help but watch this girl's expression –she had been watching her movements with expressed awareness, but as things started to get squeezy, her face shifted into arguably one of the cutest pouting faces Ryuko had ever seen, what with her cheeks all puffed out. Not that she had seen a lot of pouty faces. She decided to keep this thought to herself. "120 over 78," She told her. "Is that normal?"

"Yeah, but like, almost the very highest it can be before it's supposed to be concerning," She said. "That makes sense, though. My blood goes fast, I guess!"

“That doesn’t sound good.” Ryuko frowned.

“Oh no, it’s fine! If it gets worse, then I’ll get it checked out…but even then, s’not like it’s life-threatening.”

“If you say so…” She resolved, and then picked up the worksheet. “What’s next?”

Mako was busy writing down her fraction on her worksheet, and then also looked to the next step. “Heart rates?” She comprehended.

“Looks like it. How should we do that?”

“Well, there are lots of ways, but it looks like this worksheet wants us to take each other’s pulse, so I ‘spose we’ll be doing that. The wrist would probably be the easiest,” She thought aloud, and then pulled out the chair under the table to sit down. “Sit!” She invited, and Ryuko did so. She was tired of being on her feet.

“Would you happen to have a stopwatch on your phone, maybe?” Mako asked.

“Oh, yeah, pretty sure.” Ryuko then pulled her phone out of her pocket, swiped to the apps, and pulled up a standard stopwatch.

“Good! Give me your hand,” She said next. Before Ryuko even had the chance to offer it to her, Mako had already lifted it from her lap. Though it didn’t happen often, she couldn’t help but develop a light blush. She tried to focus to make it go away, but the girl wasn’t looking at her face at the moment, anyway.

With a kind delicacy, Mako flipped her hand over to expose the underside of her wrist. She then took her index and middle fingers and placed them firmly where she thought the most easily accessible vein would be. It took a bit, but she finally found a consistent light pulsation.

“You can press start on your stopwatch now, and I’m gonna count the beats for just a minute, alright?”

“Okay.” She nodded once. She didn’t really see why she couldn’t take her own pulse (even though the worksheet instructed it), but somehow she didn’t mind this. The girl was using the fingers on her left hand to detect her pulse, and with her right hand she held her wrist still, her thumb settled in the center of her palm. She watched her press ‘start’ on the timer, and then started counting in her head. As she started, her thumb moved across her palm very slightly, causing a light tickling sensation. Ryuko shifted slightly in response.

The minute seemed to last forever. By the thirty-second mark, Ryuko began wondering about the practicality of doubling the number she currently was at. But she didn’t stop her; instead, she placated herself in watching the girl’s face. She kind of zoned out staring at her focused eyes, and at some point it occurred to her that she probably noticed her staring, but for some reason she didn’t really care.

“Your heart’s beating pretty fast,” Mako spoke without making eye contact.

“Is that bad?”

“No.” Was all she said.

A few seconds later, the timer on her phone beeped at a medium volume. “Alright!” Mako said, releasing her hand a bit suddenly. “A solid 74 beats per minute.”

“I think that’s normal,” Ryuko responded, as if she had some knowledge on the subject. She wrote the number on her own worksheet, slammed her pencil back down, and then faced her. “Your turn?”

It only took a moment for her to get the girl’s pulse down. She was glad to note that this value wasn’t borderline dangerous like her blood pressure had apparently been, and indicative of a healthy heart…not that it was any of her business. What really surprised her was that even after they had finished their little semi-awkward lab, she didn’t just get up and walk back to her desk –she stayed where she was sitting next to her.

“So, Ryuko,” She started, getting her attention again. “What’s it like, being in the band? Playing the snare drum?”

At this, Ryuko’s eyes lit up. “Awesome, to say the least!” She reminisced. “Being able to show off my skill like that is a feeling like no other. The crowd’s energy…I just live for it.” She looked at her, smiling. “But you probably know that feeling, huh? Performing? Miss Varsity-Cheerleader.”

Mako smiled just as brilliantly. “I’m surprised you could tell the difference. But yes! I really love it, cheering our team on and all…I think it really helps our them be the best it can be!” Ryuko chuckled at her sort of generic cheerleader statement. “It really is a lot of fun! But sometimes the other girls can be kinda-“

Just then, she was interrupted by the bell. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was almost time to go!” She stood up, picking up her paper and pencil quickly. “Well, it was nice working with you, Ryuko!” And then she was back at her own desk within a second.

“Class!” The teacher said, getting their attention at the last second. “You’ll also have the beginning of the hour tomorrow to finish your labs. Don’t waste your time! Have a nice day.”

Ryuko took her time gathering her things, packing up her backpack with idle movements. She watched Mako exit the classroom. She got the distinct feeling there was really something more to this girl…she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. Maybe it was her openness. Either way, she already found her character rather refreshing.

Chapter End Notes

I took honors anatomy myself last year, but my knowledge may be a bit rusty!! I think all of this is accurate, though. A little fun fact is the class I originally had them sharing

was chemistry (solely so I could make a cheesy pun), but turns out I am so bad at chemistry it was taking me forever to write so I had to change it!!

Anyway, here's to the second chapter! Feel free to present your thoughts.

Chapter 3: A Pickle

Chapter Summary

Ryuko makes some important realizations with the help of Nonon.

The school week flew by rather quickly. Ryuko noted that Mako continued to sit next to her in anatomy class, even after they had finished their partner work. Which was okay, because no one in sat next to her before that anyway. It was nice to have an acquaintance sit next to her so that *someone* would have to endure the snarky comments she made about the teacher. Mako was the perfect person to fill this position; the girl giggled at almost everything out of Ryuko's mouth.

So when Friday night rolled around again and Ryuko found herself in the bleachers once more, she was feeling pretty excited. Since the band had finally prepared enough drill to get a decent amount of the first movement on the field, they were permitted to perform at halftime.

Just as Nonon came over to sit down next to her, Ryuko spotted Mako down on the track among the cheerleaders. The girl turned around rather suddenly to face the stands, and seemed to be scanning the crowd for someone. Finally, her eyes locked with Ryuko's (to her surprise), and she smiled big and waved. Ryuko's eyes widened, and then she waved back, hoping it was her she was actually waving at and not someone behind her.

"Who're you waving at?" Nonon asked, looking in the direction she was. "Ahh, I see!"As Mako saw Nonon see her, she waved at her as well. Nonon waved back with a facetious attitude, sitting down next to the younger teen.

"I see you two are…acquainted." She nudged her.

"I guess?" She didn't look at her. "Not sure why you're egging this on."

"Because I think it'd be sweet," She stated simply. "You need a girlfriend, what with all your sulking."

"I don't sulk," She defended.

Nonon rolled her eyes. "Anyway," She smiled. "do you think she's cute?"

"I don't see why it matters," She responded, trying to keep her voice level despite its slight faltering. She knew there was no way to get around Nonon, but she figured she'd try anyway.

"You really do!"

“Like I said, it’s not like it matters.” She finally looked toward her. “It’s not like I’ll do anything about it…it’s just not like anything could happen. Besides, I still don’t know her very well at all.”

Nonon frowned. “Well, not with that attitude.”

“Look,” Ryuko spoke seriously. “I know you’ve had pretty good luck with…your own experiences, but I haven’t been so lucky. I ain’t about to fall for a straight girl. It’s not worth it.”

“How do you know she’s straight?” She said indignantly.

“You said so yourself! That most cheerleaders are,” She said, and before she had a chance to respond, “Besides, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Yes, she’s *cute*, but like I said I still don’t know her very well.”

“Fair enough,” She said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s no big deal.” She smiled, and looked toward the field again. “I need a friend like you, encouraging me. You offset my pessimism." She added with a mumble, "Just wish you were less invasive."

“You need more than just me to offset your pessimism…besides, I like to think of myself as more of a realist, rather than an optimist.” She thought aloud. “If you want to be around optimist, I think you’ve found one in your little acquaintance down there.”

Ryuko sighed. “Maybe.”

Before either of them knew it, halftime rolled around and it was time for them to perform. The band gathered on the left side of the track, ready to make their entrance. The director signaled for the taps to start, and that was Ryuko’s cue. They marched onto the field and got into position, waiting for the gesture from the drum majors. Finally, their performance began.

Ryuko kept her expression hard and focused as she chopped out her memorized rhythms and effortlessly snapped through her sets. Truly, she was an excellent marcher –as she should be, being an upperclassman. This is more than could be said for some other juniors, however. Ryuko put her all into performing; she could feel the crowd’s eyes on her, and she wanted to show them how badass and talented she was. Who wouldn’t?

The show ended and the crowd roared, even in spite of the fact that it was only about half of the opener. Ryuko tapped the band back onto the track, exhausted yet exhilarated. She could feel her hair plaster to her face and forehead because of the sheer amount of sweat. Just as she was taking her drum off her harness to place it near the bleachers, she saw someone approach her in the corner of her eye.

“Ryuko!” A familiar voice called. “You did great out there!”

She looked up. “Mako! Oh hey, thanks.” She still a bit winded, as it was audible in her voice.

“No problem!” She smiled. “My eyes were glued to you the whole time. Your focus was incredible!”

Ryuko couldn’t help but blush a bit. She mentally blamed it on the September heat. “Really? You think so?”

“Definitely!” The girl looked down at her high-top cheerleading shoes, and then scuffed at the ground with one. “So…do you have a break now?”

“Yeah, the whole band’s got third quarter off.”

“Good! The cheerleaders have a little break now, too, do you wanna go get some concessions?” She asked quickly.

“Oh, uh, yeah!” She looked toward the bleachers, where the band was already almost done regrouping. She spotted Nonon. “It’s just, I was gonna go with Nonon…”

Nonon had finished her conversations with other respective band members, and had then looked over at Ryuko as she talked to Mako. When she saw the conflicted look in Ryuko’s eyes, she rolled her own and motioned for both of them to go with her.

“Looks like she wouldn’t mind me tagging along!”

Ryuko smiled at her. “Let’s go, then.”

When they got around to the concession stand, it was already flooded with people –both crowd members and band members. They found the shortest line and got in it.

“I never know what to get!” Mako spoke up. “Cheering always makes me so hungry…and everything sounds so good…”

“I always get the nachos,” Ryuko said. “Can’t go wrong.”

“Mmm…that sounds good, too!” She pouted a bit and put her hand over her stomach.

“Yeah, what with their questionable meat, I wouldn’t get anything that has beef or pork in it. Blegh,” Nonon interjected. “I like their pickles. Juicy.”

Mako looked at the pink-haired girl with a desperate expression. “Now I want a pickle, too!” At this, both the other girls laughed.

“Get whatever you want, Mako.” Ryuko smiled. “No one’s gonna judge you.”

“What if I buy the whole stand?” She challenged jokingly.

“That would be impressive,” Nonon said.

“Nah, I only got this five-dollar bill.” Mako pulled the money not-so-inconspicuously from her bra. “And that’s why I’m conflicted! Concession food is always so expensive.”

Ryuko stared at her. “Tell you what,” She began. “Get yourself some delicious nachos and a drink, and I’ll buy you your own pickle.”

Mako looked up at her in awe. “But pickles are a whole dollar! I couldn’t ask you to spend your own money on me…” Her voice got quieter.

“Woe is me, a whole dollar!” Ryuko said sarcastically. “It’s no big deal, Mako. I’m offering.” She smiled at her.

Mako smiled back even wider, and then gave her a big hug. “Thank you, Ryuko!”

“It’s just a pickle,” She wheezed slightly, taken aback. Nonon snickered next to them, and Ryuko gave her a look out of the corner of her eye.

The line finally started moving more quickly, and they got their concessions with surprising efficiency. Ryuko and Nonon were momentarily at a loss; they weren’t sure where to eat, because they couldn’t bring Mako back to the band section of the bleachers with them. However, their problem was quickly resolved as they watched in complete awe as the girl practically dumped the nachos into her mouth and finished them with astounding efficiency.

“Okay then,” Nonon said quietly.

“You were right, Ryuko!” Mako smiled. “Delicious!” She then took a look at her pink wristwatch, her eyes widening. “Oh, I gotta get back now! We’re about to get into formation! Thanks for the pickle!”

Before Ryuko could say ‘you’re welcome’, she was gone, pickle and Gatorade in hand. “She’s really something,” She spoke to Nonon.

“Psh, that’s an understatement.”

Their home team later ended up winning by an almost twenty-point lead, and the crowd was rightfully rowdy as they exited the bleachers, shoving each other and being loud. This only made it harder for band kids to weave their way back to the band room.

After they did get around to getting out of their uniforms and finally getting to breathe, Ryuko and Nonon met up to go hang out post-game –something they did just about every other game. They always chose this rather generic Mexican restaurant they never remembered the name of, just the street it was on.

Nonon’s car was pretty small, but rather fitting considering the girl’s stature. It was alright though, Ryuko figured, because it was cozy. The drive to the place was a short five minutes, if that. When they got there, they only ordered two lemonades because the previous concessions usually left their bellies satisfied, plus their lemonade was to die for.

“So…” Nonon spoke, stirring her straw.

“So,” Ryuko said, sipping her drink.

“I’m sorry I keep bringing it up, I really am, but…the way you keep looking at Mako, you’ve gotta be interested in her! I can see it. How you treated her at the concession stand and the way she kept peeking up at you between cheers,” She clarified. “I know you said you think she’s at least *cute*, but-“

“Nonon,” Ryuko interrupted with a level tone. She looked up at her with plain eyes. Then, she couldn’t help but crack a smile. “I’m sorry.” She chuckled lightly. “Today, at the beginning of the game…I may have been a bit mad at myself, and I may have taken it out just a little bit on our conversation.” She sighed, and then rolled her eyes. “The truth is I’m trying to be rational about this, but…” She looked toward her drink again and started playing with the ice cubes using her straw. “This Mako girl…like I said, she’s something else. And I’m fascinated by her. I don’t know what that means, and I’m just apprehensive.”

Ryuko looked up to survey Nonon’s reaction, only to find her face completely lit up. “Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Ryuko said before she could speak a word. “Yes, I *like* her. Yes, it might be what you could call a *crush*. But I’m telling you, I don't think it's a big deal...and it isn’t without reason.”

“Of course it isn't,” Nonon said knowingly.

“During anatomy, she just…she told me she wasn’t very smart, but her intuition is remarkable. She figures things out very quickly, but it seems to be only things that she has interest in. And her dad’s a doctor, so she really is pretty good at anatomy, even though she said she wasn’t, and…I’m sorry, I just…I’ve never seen someone *think* the way that she does.”

“Mako,” The pink-haired girl spoke her name in disbelief. “Mako *Mankanshoku?*”

“Yeah, I know what I said about her sleeping in class, but ever since she started sitting next to me, she stays awake,” Ryuko explained simply, sipping her lemonade again. “Now that doesn’t necessarily means she pays attention to the lesson, but…”

“She sits next to you? Every class?” She stirred her straw idly. “Do you have assigned seats?”

“Hm-mm. She just chooses to sit by me. And it’s not really awkward, either. She always has something to talk about.” The dark-haired girl looked up at Nonon with light in her eyes. “And the stories she tells…sometimes they’re hard to follow because she really *does* talk fast, and sometimes she decides to start telling them when the teacher is still talking, but they really are worth hearing…most of the time.” She took another sip. “I’ll be honest, I tuned some of them out at first, but then some of the words she said caught my attention.”

“Well, what does she talk about?” Nonon asked.

“Lots of stuff. Cheerleading, her family, things she’s heard, random things she knows. She really is an open book. It’s been a week and I know not only how big her family is, but the names of the people in it.” She absentmindedly dragged her finger up the condensation on her glass. “I’ve noticed something, though.”

“What is it?”

“Whenever she’s about to talk about something that has to do with the cheerleading team, or any girl on the team specifically, she cuts it short. Like, abruptly. I asked her to explain more once but she totally seized up. I dropped it, but…” She looked up at her. “I’m concerned, like, genuinely for her. I don’t know what’s wrong and I don’t want to pry, but I really want to help. I just…don’t really understand why I care the way I do. But I do.”

“Is that why you’re always trying to ‘discretely’ watch her during her cheer routine? To figure it out?”

Ryuko’s cheeks colored. “Yeah that’s…part of it.”

“Ryuko Matoi, you are the most transparent homo.”

She fumbled with her paper straw wrapper. “We’ve established she’s cute,” She mumbled.

Nonon scoffed. “*You’ve* established she’s cute.”

“Yeah, whatever.” She propped her chin up on her palm. “You should see the way she gets excited about the little things, though. Usually I’d find that kinda annoying, but when she does it, it’s…” She looked toward Nonon just to find her giving her a sardonic look. “You know what, never mind.” She thumped her arm down on the table.

“No, no, I’m sorry!” She waved her hands back in forth. “It’s just been forever since I’ve seen you get like this.”

“Yeah, well. Can we talk about something else now?” She sipped her drink quickly.

“Sure, sure. But first, promise me something.”

“What?” She didn’t move her lips from the straw.

“Ask her to hang out.” Ryuko looked up at her in disbelief, and for a second Nonon swore she was about to do a spit take. “I didn’t say ask her out, not like that! I mean, ask her to hang out with you sometime. Just to get to know her better, like you seem to want to?”

Ryuko did a big sigh, and then took her time taking another sip of her lemonade. “I guess that’s not a bad idea.”

Chapter 4: Mako's House

Chapter Summary

Ryuko goes to Mako's house and they have a lengthy chat.

Mako shuffled into the anatomy classroom, hands on her backpack straps. It was her last class of the day, and she always looked forward to it. She made her way to her seat on the other side of the room, only to find that Ryuko wasn't there yet. This was a bit unusual; more often than not, she was already there when she got there. She shrugged, and then sat in her chair and pulled out her anatomy notebook.

Just as the final bell was about to ring, Ryuko stepped into the room and walked quickly to their table. "Sorry I'm late," She said to her. "Was a little caught up finishing a test."

"How'd that go?"

She sighed and sat. "Not much better than they usually go." She got situated, and then looked at her. "Never mind that, how has your day been?" She smiled.

"Hey wait, I'm sure that's not true! Ryuko is very smart. I've seen her do smart things." Ryuko blinked at her. "For example, you finished that test, right?"

"I mean, yeah, but that doesn't mean I did well."

"The smart thing was that you finished it, and that you gave it your all!" She flashed a grin. "That's what matters."

Ryuko stared at her for a moment, and then chuckled. "Right."

"I'm serious!" She said, puffing out her cheeks a little. "A lot can be accomplished through believing in yourself."

"Mako, you're starting to sound like one of those motivational anime." She jabbed playfully.

"Maybe, but it's true." She raised her eyebrows, and the conversation was dropped as the teach walked in and gained the class' attention. They faced forward simultaneously.

Mako ended up not saying a whole lot that hour, mostly because her brain was filled with thoughts regarding Ryuko's self-confidence, and Ryuko in general. She realized that it was usually her who was doing most of the talking during their conversations, and she wondered how she could get Ryuko to say more things about herself. As far as she could tell, the girl has no outward reason to be self conscious, but she just didn't know. She brainstormed ways she could know more. Ask more questions? Maybe.

“Hey, Ryuko?” She leaned over a bit.

“Hm?” She responded, seemingly interrupted from a daydream.

I’ll just go for it, Mako thought. “You wanna come over to my house after school this Friday? We don’t have a game this week, and I think it could be real fun. I mean, I don’t want to pressure you or anything if you’re busy or don’t feel like it or something-“

“Mako.” She smiled. “I’d love to come over. I meant to ask you if you wanted to hang out sometime, anyway.”

“You did? Well then, it works out!” Ryuko nodded at her, and then looked back to the lecturing teacher.

Mako couldn’t stop smiling to herself. It had been forever since she had a friend over! It was only Tuesday, but she just couldn’t wait already. It was such a good idea! She knew she would have a lot of fun with Ryuko, and she could plan some entertaining activities for them to do together –on second thought, she most definitely should do that so that she won’t get bored. That would be *terrible*-

Her giddy thoughts were interrupted by Ryuko’s voice. “Mako?” She tapped her shoulder. “I don’t know where you live.”

“Oh, of course! Duh!” She scribbled her address on the bottom of a page on her notebook and tore it out, handing it to Ryuko. “Do you drive, or should we pick you up?”

“Nah, I usually drive here, so I can just drive to your place after school, since my car will already be here.” She confirmed. “But yeah, that sounds cool, I’ll-“

“Ryuko. Mako.” The teacher called out, immediately catching their attention, and their mouths shut.

After only a few seconds and as the teacher began teaching again, Ryuko leaned in next to Mako, catching her just a little off-guard. “I’ll definitely be there.” She finished her statement.

Class dragged on to its eventual end, and Mako continued to not pay much attention, despite not having further conversation with Ryuko. Her mind continued to wander other places, like how it would be when she met her family and saw her room and whatnot. She was a bit nervous, subconsciously scribbling on her notes. Before she knew it, the class was packing up.

“Hey, Mako? I was thinking…” Ryuko’s voice called again. Oh no, what was this about? Was she having second thoughts about coming over? She looked at her with wide eyes, partway through putting her notebook into her backpack. “I don’t have your cell number…you don’t have to give it to me if that makes you uncomfortable, I just thought it’d be easier.”

“Oh, right! Here, I’ll put it into your phone.”

Ryuko pulled her cell phone from her pocket, pulled up the ‘new contact’ screen, and then handed the device over to her. Mako quickly typed in her number, and then her first name into the contact name slot, putting a “<3” next to it. Then, she pressed ‘save’.

“There ya go!” She smiled wide, giving her the phone back. Ryuko then looked at it, saw the little heart, and then felt her cheeks heat up just a bit. ‘Something else’ really was the most efficient way to describe this girl.

The bell rang, and Mako waved goodbye and went on her way. She couldn’t help but smile on her way out of the building, not really caring about the people around her who saw her beaming at the ground.

The next three days went by more slowly than they usually did, especially for Mako. She always tried to find the good in every day, but the days until Friday were useless to her! By the time she got to anatomy on that golden Friday, she was practically teeming with excitement.

She wasn’t quite sure what it was yet, but something about talking to Ryuko made her very happy. She thought Ryuko to be one of the best listeners she’s ever had the pleasure of talking to, besides her own mom. Being around Ryuko also made her content, too; the girl seemed to radiate, well, not necessarily positive vibes per say, but good ones. Interesting, different ones. Like previously established, she wasn’t sure *why* exactly but she really, really wanted Ryuko to like her.

“Someone’s a bit more jumpy than usual, huh?” Ryuko said, watching Mako come over to their table.

“I am very eager about today!” She declared, separating her words like she was making an active effort to keep her voice level.

She blinked at her. “You’re that excited about it?” She made sure to keep judgment out of her tone; she was genuinely interested in the degree to which she valued the prospect of hanging out with her. Personally, she was probably just about as excited, but she might’ve just been a bit better at internalizing it.

“Yes!” She said, plopping down in her chair next to her with emphasis.

“I’m glad.” She smiled.

Today as the class went by, Ryuko noticed Mako being quiet again. One would think that with so much energy, she would be speaking even more than usual. Maybe she was saving conversational topics for when they got to her house? She wasn’t sure. She thought it to be a defined plausibility, though; granted Mako is what someone might call a chatterbox, one can only say so much, it seems.

That particular thought bore another: how would she keep it getting from awkward when she came over? There weren’t really any discomfited elements in their relationship as it stood, but going to someone’s house is kinda like breaking another friendship barrier, or at least

that's how she saw it. She hoped their current level of familiarity was natural enough so that it came easily.

A person like Mako was not the type to make Ryuko nervous (really, there was no type of person that did), but Nonon's words echoed in her mind –the words she said about her tiny crush or whatever. Super small crush, if she'd even acknowledge it as that. Not that the idea was putting a forced sense on their interactions, quite the opposite: it instilled a sense of curiosity and friendliness. But she would admit…she was a *little* nervous. If all else failed, she could just play it cool. Because she was really good at doing that.

Casually, she looked over to the girl sitting next to her. She seemed to be scribbling something in her anatomy notebook. Ryuko sat up and propped her elbow against the surface of the table and put her chin in her palm. She didn't look to Mako's drawing, but rather her expression. She didn't seem to notice her watch, or at least she didn't mind. Her face had scrunched up just a bit with her focus –she had crinkly lines on her nose, her tongue peeking from her lips very slightly. It was just then that Ryuko noticed she had tiny, light brown freckles sprinkled across her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose, likely the kind to develop after prolonged exposure to sunlight.

Her amber eyes panned over to meet Ryuko's gaze and she spoke, "Do you wanna see what I drew?"

She cleared her throat slightly. "Sure."

Mako then scooted her notebook over just a bit so she could see it better. "It's a bunny!" She proclaimed, but quietly so the teacher wouldn't reprimand them again. She looked over to the crudely drawn rabbit in question. It had a big smile on its furry face, and Ryuko thought it to be one of the cutest things in the most innocent sense of the word.

Okay, so maybe the crush wasn't quite 'super small'.

The rest of the hour passed without incident. Ryuko mentally ran through her immediate plans involving preparing herself to leave the building and head over to Mako's. It was then as she was packing up that she voiced a question before even thinking through it.

"Hey, how do you get home?" She asked Mako simply.

She faced her. "Oh, that! I uh, ride the bus."

"You don't drive yet?" She wasn't necessarily surprised, just curious.

"No, I have my license, actually." She pulled a backpack strap over her shoulder. "Just not a car."

"Mako, when I said I could drive to your house myself, that's only because I assumed that you drove yourself to school." She looked at her sympathetically. "I can drive you there, too, you know. In my car."

"The thought didn't cross my mind," She admitted sheepishly. "That would be okay, then?"

“Definitely,” She said, her infliction stressed slightly. She noticed this and, not wanting to concern her, continued, “It would be kinda silly to get there separately, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” She said, embarrassment under her tone. Just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of the day.

“Honestly, Mako, it’s no big deal.” Instinctively, she placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and smiled down at her. “Let’s go?”

“Lead the way!” She said, regaining the signature pep in her voice. Ryuko chuckled briefly, appreciating how she made it sound like they were going on a journey.

They weaved through the mass of people congesting the halls with some difficulty. The last bell of the day always incited the most rowdy yet stagnant formations of students (seriously, didn’t people know how to walk?). Mako kept her pace with Ryuko, but Ryuko admittedly almost lost her a few times because she was just so short. Once they made it to the parking lot, it was a lot easier to navigate their surroundings.

She found her car very quickly, because she always tried to park in the same spot and usually succeeded. She drove a black mustang, which she had to use mostly her own money to purchase.

“Ooh, this is your car?”

“Mhm,” She acknowledged, unlocking it.

“It suits you.” She nodded at the vehicle. “Very sleek.”

“Thank you.” Ryuko offered a small smile, deciding the statement was a compliment. She pressed a button on her keys, popping the trunk. “You can go ahead and put your backpack in the trunk.”

The brunette approached the car as though it was sacred. She then slowly removed her backpack straps from her shoulders, and then gingerly lowered the bag into the car. Ryuko watched her do this, and then took off her own backpack and flung it nonchalantly next to hers, pulling the lid it shut afterwards. Then, she got in the driver’s seat and Mako got in the passenger’s.

Mako was quick to buckle her own seatbelt. Ryuko started the car, mumbling something about the heat and its effect on her black car. She turned on the air conditioning and then got ready to pull out, before she was stopped by a hand on her arm. She looked over to the girl in question, taken aback.

“Your seatbelt.”

Ryuko blinked. “Oh, right.” She reached over, pulled it across herself, and clicked it. She never wore her seatbelt.

Things like this were the kind of things that really got her thinking about what kind of person Mako was. She was learning new things about her every day it seemed, not only in the things

she said, but also the things she did and how she did them. For example, Ryuko herself never wore her own seatbelt for undistinguished reasons she never really thought about. Most of the time, she just forgot to. But Mako's promptness in noticing…maybe she was reading too much into it, but it was obvious she valued life pretty highly.

Ryuko had known approximately where Mako's address was (or at least the street), so she allowed her thoughts about Mako's personality to progress rather than pay explicit attention to directions. As she drove, Mako stayed relatively silent as well, aside from the few obligatory dogs she *had* to point out.

She thought back to the way the girl didn't even ask her for a ride to her own house. Mako was *definitely* the in-your-face type, so why was it with things like that, she didn't ask? There's no way it just 'didn't cross her mind', because she could tell from how excited she was about the whole hang-out arrangement that she had thought it out a couple times, minimum. Maybe she was just afraid of inconveniencing her, even though a ride certainly didn't constitute as one, especially since she was going to the same place as her.

Ryuko knew nothing about psychology and she wasn't about to pretend she did, but she found the contradiction in character kind of fascinating, but mostly concerning. With a tendency to be spontaneous and outgoing, one would think she would also be inclined to impose, even occasionally. Still, that's where she got lost, because the drive wasn't even an imposition in the first place.

"Hey, Mako?" She got her attention.

Her head turned to face her, her hair fluid with her motion. "Hm?" Her hands were folded neatly in her lap.

"You know, if there's a time you don't feel like riding the bus or whatever, I could always give you a ride home." She offered this not only because she was willing to, but she legitimately wanted to see the way she would react to the proposition. "It's not that far or out of the way from my own place, so it's no hassle," She added for good measure.

"You'd really do that?" She asked, touched.

"I mean, yeah." She generally kept her eyes on the road, but glanced over a few times to read her face.

"That's really nice of you," She said sweetly before continuing. "Honestly, I really hate riding the bus! It's mostly underclassmen on there, and they're really loud! I tried to make some bus friends one time, but I don't think they liked me very much."

Ryuko frowned. "That's no good."

"I know right?" She then looked toward her lap. "But…you'd do that? You'd drive me home?" She brought the topic back.

"Of course," She said sincerely. "I wouldn't even mind doing it every day, if you wanted."

“Oh, well I have cheerleading practice on Thursdays so I have to stay after school, but I could take you up on that offer on the rest of the weekdays.” She looked to her. “I mean! Only if you’re super sure about it, I don’t want to be a burden.”

There it was. “It’s really no burden, Mako.”

“Well, okay then!” She said, sounding genuinely happy about the arrangement. So that settled it: Mako really did refuse to impose.

Ryuko had slowed the car on the street the address was to appear. “Ah –this is it!” Mako blurted, pointing to the house that was apparently her own. She pulled the car to a gentle stop in the curb next to her house, seeing as there was already a car her in her small driveway.

The house was rather simple, but seemed to be fairly well-kept. The outside was brick in a beige color. There were a few shrubs around the small porch that looked like they were once tended to religiously, but had recently been neglected. A modest, slightly-cracked walkway led from the driveway to the porch.

“It’s…charming,” Ryuko commented.

“I know it’s tiny, you don’t have to pretend,” Mako said lightheartedly, opening the car door.

“Yeah, but I think it’s nice.” She also exited the car. “Cozy.”

“If you say so,” Mako settled, and Ryuko didn’t press the subject.

They retrieved their backpacks from the trunk and Mako led the way to the door. She took out her keys from a side pocket in her bag, and struggled for a moment to get the door unlocked. Once she did, she pushed it open and motioned for Ryuko to step in before her. Very polite.

“Mom, I’m home!” She called out. “And I brought Ryuko with me!”

The woman in question then emerged from the kitchen, spatula in hand. “Oh, hello there! I’m Mrs. Mankanshoku, if that wasn’t clear. Mako’s told me all about you!” She smiled.

“She has?” Ryuko asked impulsively.

“Oh, definitely!”

“Mom,” Mako said in a fake-warning tone, raising her eyebrows at her mother.

She waved a hand at her daughter. “Well, I’ve just finished up making you girls some cookies. Not the healthiest after-school snack, but I figured ‘why not’, you know?” She gestured to the kitchen. “Just tell me if you need anything else!”

“Will do, ma’am.” Ryuko smiled politely.

The girls made their way into the kitchen, Ryuko openly surveying the room in wonder. She stood by and watched Mako as she produced a plate from the cupboard, scooped about half

the cookies from the baking sheet and piled them onto the dish. “C’mon, my room is upstairs.”

They then went down the hallway and ascended a staircase Ryuko was remotely surprised to see exist; the house doesn’t look like it could even have an upstairs. As they went up, the older teen tried her very best not to stare at Mako’s butt, but there were some social conventions that she had a hard time adhering to. Mako didn’t seem to notice, anyway.

It turned out that her room was the kind of room that encompasses the entire upper floor. That being said, it was bigger than she expected. The space was very suiting to Mako’s character, she thought: the walls were baby blue, adorned in various posters and cute decorations. Her bed was only a twin, and it appeared to be covered in approximately fifteen different stuffed animals. The thing that stood out to her the most, however, was the way the room was scented…she couldn’t put her finger on it, but it was incredibly pleasant, something like flowers and honey, and not the least bit overbearing.

Mako placed the tray of cookies atop a nearby nightstand, and then turned to face Ryuko. “What do you think? Comfy, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say,” She agreed. “It’s very you.” Mako tilted her head at this comment, but didn’t ask. “So, is your dad at work or something?”

“Yep! Saving lives and such.” She nodded. “Mataro’s still at school.”

“Oh that’s right, middle schoolers get out later,” Ryuko acknowledged. “Heh.”

“Yeah, so we should have some peace for a while! Like I said, my family can be a bit overbearing, so if it bothers you or anything, just say so.” She plopped down on the edge of her bed.

“I’m sure they won’t,” She said, skeptical of herself. She grabbed one of the cookies and then looked around for another place to sit, but only spotted a beanbag chair. *Good enough*, she figured, and then dropped down unceremoniously, her backpack falling near her. Mako giggled.

“So,” Ryuko began, wiggling around to adjust herself. “I’m curious. Tell me more about cheerleading. Like, what it’s like and stuff.” She nibbled the cookie.

“Well, I’ve already told you about how fun the competitions are.” She put a finger to her chin in thought. “It’s actually pretty physically exhausting! People can’t really tell, but shouting and standing and waving your arms around for hours on end with few breaks is very tiring!”

“I guess I never thought about that,” Ryuko said, mildly intrigued.

“Yeah! We don’t get as many breaks as you band folk.” She gestured to Ryuko, because she was one of those ‘band folk’. “In case it wasn’t obvious, it also takes some talent! Well, flexibility mostly.”

“And you’re pretty flexible then?” She teased, and then swallowed the last bit of the cookie.

“I would like to think so!” Just to prove it, she stood up, and not breaking eye contact with her for a second, lifted her right leg up to be parallel with her head. Ryuko had already seen her do this before when she was cheering, but it was somehow even more impressive all up close and personal.

“That’s…incredible,” She said, not really knowing what else to say. She just stared at her for the moment she held the position.

“Yeah, and that’s not all!” The girl then promptly let go of her leg, dropped the floor, and did a split. Ryuko watched her face because it looked like it hurt, but her expression was only one of concentration. She felt the weird impulse to clap for her, so she did. Mako beamed, proud of herself.

“So, yeah,” She grunted, getting up from the floor. “It’s pretty fun. I think my favorite thing to do is topping the pyramid.”

“Is that the thing where the other girls lift you up?” She was only vaguely familiar with the term.

“Yep! It was pretty scary to learn at first, but doing it for a crowd is really fun, what with everyone looking at me and stuff. They usually choose me because I’m small, I guess,” She explained.

“You are pretty short.” She smiled.

“Yeah, well.” She crossed her arms, puffing out her cheeks a little. Ryuko was beginning to think she did this as a defense mechanism, similarly to how a puffer fish would.

“That’s not a bad thing. It’s actually pretty cute,” She said without thinking.

“Cute?” She looked down at her curiously.

“Oh, uh…yeah,” She fizzled, scratching the back of her head.

“Hmm, if you say so,” She said, apparently not thinking much of the comment after all. “But yeah, the object of cheerleading is to be ‘dazzling’ as they say, so I suppose that means smiling a bunch and wearing tons of makeup.” She sat back down. “I find the smiling favorable, but sometimes the makeup is a bit much.”

“You girls do wear a lot of makeup,” Ryuko said, thinking back to when she was dressed up in her uniform with her face all made up for performance.

“I guess it’s so everyone in the crowd can see,” She figured.

“That makes sense,” She acknowledged. She looked up to see Mako twiddling her thumbs, seemingly lost in thought. She didn’t say anything else on the off chance that she would speak again first.

And she was right. “So then, what’s it like being a part of the band?”

“I think I’ve told you about this before,” She said, looking to her kindly.

“Yeah, but you only talked about the performance stuff! I wanna know about the stuff that happens behind the scenes, like the gossip about the other band members and about how your competitions are and all that.” She was gripping the edge of her mattress, swinging her legs casually.

“The gossip probably isn’t *nearly* as exciting as cheerleading gossip, for starters,” She began. “It’s mostly just who said what, who did who, who smuggled drugs onto the band bus, stuff like that,” She spoke flippantly. “I don’t really keep up with all of it, but I can’t help but listen when I hear it.”

“People *smuggle drugs* onto the band bus?” She asked in disbelief.

“I mean, not all that often,” She clarified. “’Spose cheerleaders are a bit more goody-two-shoes, huh?”

“Ryuko,” Mako gasped. “Do you…” She lowered her voice, “do *drugs*?”

“No! I don’t, I mean,” She stuttered, putting her hands up defensively. “I did once, but it wasn’t that great, so I didn’t do it again.” She crossed her arms. “I think they’re overrated.”

“Ryuko Matoi: too cool for drugs.” She nodded like she was taking a mental note.

This caused Ryuko to burst out laughing, “Oh yeah, definitely.” Her laughter was contagious, and Mako also began giggling. “Stay in school, kids,” She said in a faux cool-guy tone.

Once they settled down, Ryuko continued. “But yeah, being part of the band really is a unique experience. It seems you either love it or you hate it. I, for one, have always loved it, so I worked my way to the top.” She thought for a moment. “The position of center snare being the top, that is.”

Mako had been staring at her intently, listening very fixedly. “It *is* rewarding,” Ryuko went on, “I don’t have to go out of my way to exercise because marching and percussion in general keeps me in shape.”

“Is that why your bicep is so firm?” Mako blurted.

The older teen looked at her, a bit dumbfounded. “I suppose,” She chuckled.

“I’m sorry,” Mako said in a high-pitched voice, hiding her face in her hands. Ryuko continued to look at her for a moment until she peeked comically between her fingers, just to see her friend smiling back at her. She decided to remove her palms from her face.

“Anyway,” She continued, amused. “I think besides the performances, the process of actually going to competitions is my favorite. Specifically, the band bus itself. The rides are usually couple hours long, and it gives us all time to goof around and have fun. It’s especially fun on the way back when it’s nighttime.”

“Ooh, that *sounds* fun!” She said. “Cheerleading competitions are similar, I guess, but we don’t compete very often. And on the way there and back, no one really talks to each other besides close friends who joined the squad together.” Her voice got quieter with apprehension.

“Wait, why did you join the squad, then? If you don’t have any friends on it?” Ryuko asked innocently.

“Because I knew I had the talent to, and honestly I love pepping up a crowd!” She answered enthusiastically and then looked down at her lap. She then spoke even quieter again, “It does get old sometimes though, too.”

There it was again, Mako being vague about the subject. Maybe, Ryuko figured mentally, since they weren’t at school at the moment she’d be more open about it. “What do you mean by that?”

The younger teen had a small, sad smile on her face and refused to make eye contact. Nevertheless, she quietly continued, “I don’t think the other girls on the squad like me very much.”

Ryuko was on the edge of her (beanbag) chair, her eyebrows knit in concern. Mako looked over to her and saw how she had her undivided attention, and felt a little better opening up. “I think they find me annoying. I’m not sure? I don’t really know how else to make friends rather than being super nice and friendly. Isn’t that the point? To be friendly?” She sounded almost like she was about to cry.

“Mako…” Ryuko whispered.

She sniffled. “They’re not mean to me or anything like that, well, not anymore. They used to be when I first joined…they seemed to be openly irritated by me, but when they saw that I’m actually pretty good at what I do, they switched from teasing me to my face to talking about me behind my back.” Her smile grew a little at her next thought. “That doesn’t really stop me, though. What’s important is that we cheer our team to victory, so I’m gonna continue to cheer and give them my little pep talks.” She looked over to Ryuko again. “It’s worked so far! We haven’t lost a game yet.”

“Mako, that’s really…” She took a second to compose her thoughts. “That’s really admirable. That sort of resilience isn’t something everyone has. It’s very commendable.” She then made sure she was making eye contact with the girl before she spoke again, “You want my two cents?”

Mako nodded, and Ryuko smiled. “You don’t need to be friends with people like that. I’m not saying you shouldn’t at least *tolerate* people you have to be around all the time, but girls like that? They’re petty. Catty. Especially as teenagers,” She spoke with sincerity. “You’re much better off.”

“Thanks, Ryuko.” She sounded touched. Mako knew the girl was thoughtful and considerate based off of previous conversations they had had together, but she wasn’t totally aware of the

wisdom she also evidently possessed. She found herself again wondering more specifics about Ryuko's past; what exactly she had been through.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Mako. When we first started talking, I wasn't really sure what to think about you. You're very…outgoing. It was a little off-putting. But not necessarily in a bad way! I was just confused, and I thought that was all there was to you – your bounciness." She then rose from the beanbag chair with some difficulty, walked over to Mako, and sat down next her on the bed before continuing. "But I was wrong. You're also very caring and compassionate, and even if you don't think so, I also think you're very smart. In your own way. Don't let those girls get to you."

There was a brief silence. "I don't know what to say," Mako muttered. No one had ever said things like that to her before (besides her own mother, but moms are kind of supposed to be like that). She was incredibly grateful, but didn't quite know how to convey the sentiment.

She didn't have to, because Ryuko then continued, "If they ever give you trouble again, just get ol' bad-ass center-snare Ryuko to give them the what for."

At this statement, Mako looked over to her with playful skepticism, her eyebrows arched and an amused smile adorning her features. Ryuko tried to hold her poker face, but couldn't help but laugh, Mako quickly joining in. Soon enough, the entire room was filled with their practically harmonious giggles. Ryuko halted immediately, however, when she felt Mako's arms wrap around her in a tight embrace.

"Thank you," She spoke into her shoulder.

"N-No problem."

Soon enough, Mako broke apart from her and scooted back a little further on her bed so that she could sit criss-cross, facing Ryuko. She pulled one of her many stuffed animals into her lap, this one happening to be a bunny. "You know," She started, caressing her stuffed rabbit. "my first impression of you was a bit different than how I see you now, too."

She looked at her curiously. "How so?"

"Well, you look pretty tough so I thought your personality would be, too. And I mean, you do seem to be a bit aggressive, but I think it's in a good way." She squinted in thought. "More like…defensive when you need to be. Am I wrong?"

Ryuko chuckled, "No, you're right."

"I think you're very protective of your friends. You seem like the type of person to maintain a lot of long-term friendships." She smiled.

"Well, I guess…" She said, averting her gaze. "I actually don't have a lot of friends. Or old friends, for that matter. Not that I mind, really…people kinda just don't bother with me, I guess. Nonon and I have only been friends for about two years, and even then we started out hating each other."

“Really?” Mako asked, genuinely surprised.

“Definitely. We had something of a band kid rivalry. We were both really driven to our goals and I think we just kinda mutually found each other to be too cocky. Then, we actually talked and found out we’re a lot alike.” She looked toward the younger teen, who now had two more stuffed animals situated in her lap and appeared to be gathering more. “I guess she’s my only real friend,” She finished lamely.

“Not anymore!” Mako declared without hesitation.

“Huh?” Ryuko met her eyes; they seemed to be sparkling with a distinct sense of determination.

“Not anymore,” She repeated. “You also have me.”

“Mako…” She whispered, staring at her in wonder. “Yeah, you’re right.” She grinned.

Chapter 5: Vague

Ryuko eventually left Mako's house once the girl seemed to be dozing off (which, incidentally, was around the late late hour of eight-thirty). She told her she thought it was a good time to take off, to which Mako responded with light despondency, insisting she wasn't sleepy at all. She made her promise she'd come over again sometime soon, and Ryuko had no problem doing so because she really did have a good time.

She had the rest of the weekend to reflect on the time they spent together.

She noticed the conversational topics got heavy rather quickly, and while that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, it was something to chew on. It indicated that Mako really *didn't* have a whole lot of people to talk to about personal things, or at least, people who would listen and respond in kind. This left Ryuko with mixed feelings.

She felt bad for her, but it was more empathy than sympathy, because she could relate pretty well. Something inside her really wanted her to be that person for Mako; the person she could go to and trust with anything. She really wanted to be there for her, but she was also a little uneasy about it…she couldn't really tell how temperamental she was yet.

Not that she couldn't deal with temperamental people to a certain degree, at least; everyone has their respective limits. But she was getting ahead of herself again: Mako didn't show any signs of being the bad sort of unpredictable. She felt like she needed to spend more time with her to figure all that out.

She also felt like she needed to spend more time with her because she really *wanted* to. She couldn't remember the last time she had so much fun spending time with one person, doing nothing in particular at that. Don't get it wrong –Nonon was a really good friend to her, but even she could get to be too much at times. Every conversation she had with Mako seemed like it could go on for hours, evolving to a variety of different and interesting topics; when they were at school, every discussion they got into seemed to be cut short by the bell.

On that note, Ryuko got to thinking about Mako's mind again. Her thought process was an enigma, absolutely like no other person she'd every talked to for extended periods of time. The girl drew her conclusions before she could explain why she came to them. She always seemed to consciously pick and choose the things she would remember, as though she was filtering her consciousness. Her brain was a melting pot of concepts and impressions, and the ideas would flow almost randomly through the high-pitched tenor of her voice in rapid succession. Ryuko's brain was always jogging to catch up, but she didn't mind the mental exercise.

There was also something to be said, she thought next, about Mako's appearance. She obviously didn't notice her until she saw her cheerleading, but that's only because her attention was drawn to her. The girl was almost unreal. Her hair practically formed a perfect dome, but for whatever reason she pulled it off so well, Ryuko thought no one else even deserved to have their hair cut like that. It was a sandy blonde most of the time, but in the

sunlight it shined golden. It also looked as though the sun was responsible for those little freckles atop her cheekbones that she could only see when the girl inevitably disregarded boundaries. She was the kind of person the sun seemed to fall in love with, which was fitting because the girl was absolutely radiant.

Even though the last time Ryuko had seen Mako was Friday evening, she came into school Monday morning still thinking about her and the things they discussed together. She ran into Nonon before band class started, and she had her eyebrows raised knowingly before a word was even uttered. Ryuko's character told her to roll her eyes at this, but her current attitude decided to indulge it.

"So…" The pink-haired girl spoke. "How'd it go Friday?"

"It was a lot of fun," She answered honestly. "We ended up just talking about a lot of stuff."

"Ooh, talking?"

"Yep, talking."

Nonon deflated at the shoulders. "Details, Ryuko!"

"It really was kind of personal discussion, so I don't think I could share all the details in good conscience." She looked at her, and then smiled. "But I know what you want to hear, so, yes. I like her. A lot. Definitely, without-a-doubt, a crush." Her voice got progressively smaller. The second she said it aloud, the reality of it hit her. Liking someone 'a lot' was a huge risk when you're gay and the other person very well could be straight.

"Great!" Nonon grinned, and then slapped a hand onto her back. "Now all you gotta do is ask her out."

"What?!" Ryuko looked at her incredulously. "No way!"

"I was just joking!" She put up her hands. "Jeez…take your time, there's no need to-" She tapered off and, for a moment, took a closer look at Ryuko's expression and body language in general. She refused to meet her eyes, and her cheeks were a noticeable of red. Her eyebrows were drawn together like she was intensely concentrating, and her breathing was visible. "Wow, you really…you really like this girl, don't you?"

She sighed, and then met her concerned eyes. "Please help me. I don't wanna fall for a girl who could be straight. That's like, rule number one."

"Well…does she seem gay at all?" She took a seat in nearby band chair, and Ryuko followed her example.

"I…I don't know…I didn't really think too hard about it. She's so *friendly*, the way that she's comfortable breaking regular boundaries could just be due to the fact that she's so…bubbly. Wasn't it you who said she was the one who always wanted to hug everybody?"

"That was just my own experience. Why, did she hug you?"

“Yeah,” She answered simply.

“Well, this could be your new task. Step one was to ask her to hang out.” She shrugged. “Done. Step two, find out her sexuality.”

Ryuko ran a hand through her hair in mild frustration. “Or, I could just give it up and try to steer this feeling back into friendship territory.”

“Could you?” Nonon looked at her dubiously.

She placed her elbows at her knees, her head fell into her hands, and she answered quietly, “No.”

At the same moment, in the other end of the building, Mako had entered through the front doors, scrambling to get her backpack secure on her shoulder. She was a little bit late, but she had just enough time to get to her first hour without getting another daunting tardy mark. That was, until she was stopped by someone.

“Mako Mankanshoku,” The low voice spoke. “Varsity cheerleader.”

“That’s me!” Looking up, her eyes met a familiar face. “Ira?” She smiled. “The quarterback! How’ve you been? I haven’t talked to you in forever!” The two had known each other since middle school, but have only conversed and associated through a mutual friend who no longer talked to Mako herself, therefore leaving her no good reason to talk to the man in front of her until now, apparently.

“I-I’ve been good.” He had his hands semi-awkwardly jammed into his pockets. “You’re right…it has been forever since we’ve talked.” He sounded like his words were scripted, even though his words were a direct response to hers. He then cleared his throat, “I was just wondering if, maybe, you’d like to…” He closed his eyes as if he was about to brace for impact. “go out with me sometime? Catch up, maybe…” He peeked open one eye to look down at her and gauge her reaction.

Mako was staring up at him wordlessly, slightly slack-jawed. Instinctively, she moved slightly to her right and peered around him, just to see about three other jocks looking around the corner, watching them intently. She looked back up at him and stuttered, “I-I…” Then, she noticed the guy was practically sweating bullets. “I’d be glad to hang out with you sometime, but I-”

Before she could finish, his eyes popped open wide and the corners of his lips drew upward just as severely. “You would?” He interrupted, sounding genuinely excited.

“I mean, sure, but just as-”

Again, she was interrupted, “I gotta tell the guys!” He sounded slightly panicked, and then bolted off, but not before yelling, “Text me!”

His voice drew the attention of all of the surrounding students, and she could only stand dumbfounded amongst them. There was resounding silence before the whispering started,

and then as the first bell rang, people began to disperse. Suddenly, her timeliness was of lesser importance.

The next four classes of the day, Mako spent her time trying to figure out how she was supposed to text Ira without ever having had his number in the first place, and Ryuko spent her time diffusing the light anxiety that would occasionally present itself in her gut. She eventually worked up her confidence enough to feel good about the whole situation overall, maybe even hopeful. Mako was a great girl, and friendship with her on its own would be very special, she was sure of it.

Then, Nonon stopped her abruptly during the passing period between fourth hour and her fifth hour.

Her expression was frantic, and her breathing strained as though she had just got finished sprinting a sizeable distance. “Ryuko,” She looked into her eyes with the utmost concern. “There’s something you should know –about Mako…”

Ryuko rolled her eyes. “Look, we already had this discussion. I’m not about to be late to anatomy just for some-”

“Ryuko.” Her expression was the essence of gravity. “Earlier today, some guy on the football team asked Mako out.”

Chapter 6: Make it Through

Though her heart dropped almost instantaneously, her brain tried to retain some level of rationality. “What did she say?” She asked in a very tiny voice.

“She said…” Nonon searched her eyes desperately. “She said yes.”

Ryuko was silent for a solid three seconds, and then she smiled a bit unnaturally. “It’s no big deal, really…I’m happy for her. She’s probably overjoyed someone likes her like that.”

Nonon looked at her with evident sadness and sympathy written all over her face. “Don’t look at me like that,” Ryuko chided harshly. “I just told you, it’s no big deal.”

“Ryuko…”

“Look, I gotta get going. I’m not about to be late.” She then turned on her heel and began to hurry off in the opposite direction.

“Hey!” Nonon shouted, causing Ryuko to stop in her tracks for a split second. “That’s only what I’d heard. You can ask her yourself to know for sure.” The taller teen didn’t turn back around or acknowledge her, she simply kept walking.

Once she was away from the immediate situation, she had the opportunity to gain a somewhat clear head. This was an awful feeling, because it made the reality of the situation really hit her –Mako was straight. What was she thinking? Why would a girl like her *not* like guys? This probably wasn’t even the first time one of them had asked her out. She’d probably even had a couple real relationships by the time they’d met.

And then Ryuko almost stopped in her tracks. What about all those things Mako said about not having a ton of friends? Well, that was just the girls. Now that she really thought about it, especially from this perspective, those girls could just not like her not because they think she’s annoying, but because they’re jealous of her instead. That could be a real possibility; Mako was talented, thoughtful, pretty-

Ryuko wanted to bang her head hard against a nearby locker, but she didn’t for time’s sake.

That was exactly it. Mako took so kindly to her not because she liked her like that, but because she literally had no female friends. It was so obvious now.

At that thought, she felt an acidic feeling develop in her heart, something between resentment and sadness, and she knew she had no right to feel this way. She did it to herself entirely, and it wouldn’t be fair to Mako if she continued to hold…whatever that feeling was…irritability (probably the best way she could describe it), in her heart. She also knew she needed to get rid of it because she knew she was way better than to feel that way about something like this. Wasn’t it her who thought earlier that she just wanted to be there for Mako, if anything? That still held true.

When she stepped into the anatomy classroom, Mako was already there, which came as no surprise considering the bell was probably only mere seconds away from ringing. Seeing her again set off a whole different range of emotions, the instinctive one being happiness (*There's Mako, and she's smiling at you!*), but then a very strange sense of self-pity (*She doesn't like you like that, though.*) And suddenly, Ryuko felt very selfish.

"Were you caught up finishing another test?" Mako asked innocently as she walked over.

"Nah, I just…" She looked over to her big brown eyes peering up at her, and she sat down. "Just got caught up in the hall." She felt more like she got caught up in a tornado. Thankfully, she didn't ask any more questions regarding the topic.

"So, guess what?" Mako spoke like she couldn't contain herself.

Oh no, is she about to tell me about- "I asked my parents if it would be okay for you to possibly spend the night this Friday night, and they said yes! I know you were just over last Friday, but I had so much fun and I thought it would be even more fun if you could stay the entire night this time!" Ryuko's thought was interrupted by her long-winded invitation.

She was dumbstruck for a moment, and internally grateful she didn't mention the mystery guy. Even though she knew she'd have to deal with it eventually. "You want me to spend the night?" She clarified for her own sake.

"Yeah! Unless you didn't want to, which is totally okay." She smiled kindly. "We could stay up super late and have a little party."

At this, Ryuko chuckled. "Party of two?" She said with lighthearted skepticism.

"How many more people do you need?" She tilted her head.

"You're right, you kinda *are* a party. Just on your own, even." She jested playfully.

Mako nodded, promptly agreeing to her statement, because she apparently already knew she was a party. "So?"

"Oh! Right, uh…" Usually, she would agree to it in a heartbeat, with elevated enthusiasm. But in light of very recent events, she wasn't so sure it would be a good idea –for her own sake, and for Mako's. But then again, what happened to acting normal and just being friends? There had to be an easier way. Besides, how would she react if she said she didn't want to go? Maybe she could just find an excuse to not go. But still, she *really* wanted to…

"Ryuko?" A small hand waved by her vision. "Are ya there?"

"Sorry." She shook her head out of her trance. "Yeah, that sounds like fun." She impulsively decided it would be the best option to go. Plus, she just didn't want to face a disappointed Mako.

Mako frowned. "You don't sound very interested."

"I am!" She defended. "Really," Her voice was serious.

The younger teen settled back in her chair. “Okay, if you say so.”

Ryuko couldn’t find anything else to say at the moment, which was okay because class was starting. They could discuss the details later over text if they had to, she figured. That reminded her that she hadn’t texted her yet after a week of having her number…and it wasn’t like Mako could text her first without having her number.

Setting that thought aside, she propped her chin up on her palm and pretended to pay attention to the teacher’s lecture. Instead, her mind started wandering again. Was it weird that Mako hadn’t mentioned this mystery boy she was now seeing apparently? Wouldn’t she typically be giddy with excitement over something like this? Wouldn’t she want to tell her friend immediately? Then, she thought about what Nonon had said about finding out for herself.

That idea presented a very fleeting moment of hope; she looked to the girl to her left, who appeared to be paying attention to the lesson, turned away from her, and she considered speaking up then and asking about it casually. The words got caught in her throat, however, when she noticed her shifted body language.

She couldn’t put her finger on it immediately, but something was off. She was slouching quite a bit, and resting her head on the side of her own forearm, the little length of hair she had draped over the limb. Was she asleep? A curt sniffle from the girl answered ‘no’. For some reason, Ryuko found herself unable to bring it up. She then figured Mako would eventually bring it up on her own; not like asking was actually going to change the situation. She didn’t think she had the energy to pretend to be happy about it right now, anyway.

Ryuko put her head down on the table, hoping the teacher wouldn’t reprimand her for it. This was just ridiculous. No one should be able to affect her like this and make her feel quite this petty. Yet, through all of these emotions, she didn’t have it in her to deny the girl anything.

The class period eventually ended after endless minutes of attempting to concentrate on the material. Ryuko went home as she did most days, in her car with some alternative music – *something* blaring semi-obnoxiously from her speakers. Where the music usually pumped her up, today her mind drowned out the beat.

When she got home, and after feeling substantially stupid about her own feelings, she threw herself onto her couch and whipped out her cell phone. She scrolled through her short list of contacts before she reached the one labeled “Mako <3” and then squeezed the bridge of her nose in exhaustion after seeing the contact name she had forgotten. Then, she resolutely pressed the ‘Message’ option.

‘*Hey Mako,*’ She typed. ‘*It’s Ryuko. What’s up?* ’

After lying there for three minutes straight without a response, a remote part of her worried briefly about whether or not she was going to respond. Then, her phone vibrated. ‘*Ryuko!! Nothin’ much. Hbu?* ’

She couldn’t help but grin. ‘*Not much. I was just wondering what time you wanted me over Friday* ’

‘*Whenever you want! Just thought I’d give you a chance to go home and get some stuff first :o*’ Came the next text. Ryuko stared at her phone screen for a minute, unsure and not wanting to overstep the invitation by coming over too early. How early was too early? Her message implied that she wouldn’t mind it being too soon after school, so she settled on what she thought was a reasonable time.

‘*How’s 5 work for you?* ’

‘*Perfect! See you then :-)* ’

Ryuko set her phone to the side, and then suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to take a long nap.

Chapter 7: Apprehension

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the same time some streets away, Mako was laying in her bed, clutching her phone to her chest. Ryuko had finally texted her! She thought it was about time, what with it having been a whole week since she gave her her number. She thought about reminding her about it during class, but didn't want to pester her, especially considering she practically begged her to come over. She didn't feel too bad about that, however, because she could tell Ryuko genuinely had fun the last time she was over. She wouldn't lie about that, which was one of the many things she liked about her.

Mako was truly intrigued by Ryuko. She was mysterious, but not in the stereotypically mysterious way (that is to say cynical and off-putting). She was open and kind, yet reserved and protective. It was the contrast between her tough exterior and laid-back attitude versus her understanding and sympathetic heart that Mako found magnetic.

When Mako first started talking to her, she knew she had found someone with the potential to be an exemplary friend. No one had ever given her the time of day quite like Ryuko had. And after watching her conviction in performance, she was absolutely captivated by her personality.

She had trouble expressing her gratitude for the girl, and recently found her inability to do so to be quite bothersome. This is why she was initially elated when Ryuko finally texted her, because that meant they could now talk virtually whenever they wanted or, at the very least, Mako could just send her messages and she didn't have to respond.

She quickly realized, however, that this didn't mean she'd suddenly know what to say.

The problem was that Mako couldn't quite describe her feelings accurately with words. She'd never taken so kindly to any one person as quickly as she took to Ryuko. The fact didn't scare or startle her, rather, left her wanting more. Ryuko's presence was addicting. Just seeing her in person really boosted her mood.

Ryuko was also very pretty, Mako had decided before she had even first talked to her. Her smile had left an imprint on her mind; it was the kind that could light up a room, even if she was essentially bearing those tiny fangs of hers in the process. She was tall, lean, and her tousled black hair reached just to her shoulders and framed her collarbone perfectly. Her eyebrows were perhaps bushier than most, but that only served to enhance her various expressions and decorate her piercing steel-blue eyes. Her last notable attribute was the ever-present red streak in her hair, which Mako assumed was just a fashion choice that suited her very well.

The brunette rolled over on her bed and buried her face into a very fluffy pillow. "Not again," She mumbled just to herself into the fluffiness.

Of course, she chided herself mentally. *This is just like you! Having a crush on a girl who was nice to you. Very typical*. She blushed when her brain generated the word 'crush'. Ryuko was too cool to like her like that, she was sure of it. There was just no way! I mean, she had already figured Ryuko was gay, mostly because the fact she hung around Nonon a lot (who people generally knew to be a lesbian), but still, there was just no way she would like someone like her. She curled up atop her mattress, and then told her to brain to *stop it, stop it right now*.

Then, as her phone vibrated and she felt her heart get very excited at the prospect of Ryuko talking to her again, she knew she deep inside that there was no stopping it.

She quickly scooped the device off her sheet and into her palm to check the message. To her disappointment, it wasn't from Ryuko –it was from an unsaved number. The message read: '*I hope this is the right number. It's Ira. Is this Mako?* '

Mako sighed, and flipped onto her back, holding her phone above her face. '*Yes, this is she* ' Was all she sent in response.

'*Excellent! I had to get your number from one of the cheerleaders. It occurred to me only after I told you to text me that we didn't have each other's numbers. Whoops* '

'*Yeah, I was very confused all day!* ' She typed.

'*Sorry about that. So…about our date. What day is good for you?* '

Mako scrunched up her face. After she had gotten home, she had forgotten all about their little arrangement. It wasn't until he texted her that she knew she'd have to deal with this now and not later. '*I'm sorry, Ira? I don't want you to get the wrong idea…I don't know how to put this. I'm not interested in you in…that way. I meant to say that, but I was very surprised when you asked. But I would be very glad to hang out with you just as friends!!* ' She sighed as she pressed 'send'.

There were about four minutes of grudging silence before her phone notified her again. '*Oh! No, I'm sorry I made assumptions, I guess. Sorry for bothering you* '

Mako always felt bad rejecting someone (not that it happened often), even though it wasn't her fault. It was just always so awful. '*It was no bother, really :-)* ' She sent lastly. She really hated having hard feelings with anyone, so she did whatever it took to avoid that. She resolutely dropped her phone back onto the mattress and stared at the ceiling for a good five minutes, letting her mind relax.

Days passed and her situation with Ira became less and less relevant to her consciousness. It did admittedly confuse her for a while, though. They hadn't talked in forever; he asking her out seemed totally out of left field to her. Maybe that's how it worked? Maybe he asked her out in order to catch up or get to know each other better, but still in a dating way? Maybe he'd been admiring her from afar. That thought was weird, though, because that would imply someone would be pining for her…and that just didn't seem realistic to her. Nevertheless, she dropped it, and Ira didn't text her again for a few days.

Because of this, the situation almost completely left her conscience. She quickly became more worried about something else.

It was finally Friday, but all week Ryuko had been acting differently. It was subtle, but since Mako paid good attention to her, she noticed. The girl still listened to her stories and responded to her animatedly, but after every conversation she seemed deflated, almost. When they weren't talking, she seemed downright sad. Mako wanted to ask about it, but how could she? If something was seriously wrong, she wouldn't want to discuss it during school -which is why she waited until she came over that night to be able to inquire gently.

After school that day, Mako went home on the bus. She had wanted to take Ryuko up on her offer to drive her home daily, but for some reason, the idea just didn't come up again, and she didn't feel the need to mention it. Again, she just didn't want to pester her.

When she got home, she spent an hour cleaning up her room and making it all nice for Ryuko's arrival, and then spent another hour laying around thinking about what to talk about with her when she finally got there. Not having any good ideas about how to ease into talking about the girl's recent behavior, she decided she'd wing it.

Just when she started to think she might be over-thinking everything again, the doorbell rang. Though she was upstairs, Mako yelled, "I'll get it!" and then quickly cleared the stairs in her sock-covered feet, almost slipping down them in the process.

"Ryuko!" Mako beamed as she opened the door. There stood the aforementioned girl, hand on the back of her head and a blue duffle bag over her shoulder.

Ryuko had been feeling a bit tense on the drive over to Mako's, wary of the unspoken things that were present between them. She knew this was no way to maintain a friendship, and she knew she had to clear it up, which made her expectedly anxious. Really, was the whole boyfriend thing any of her business if Mako wasn't bringing it up? She really hoped asking about it wouldn't be too nosy…because she just had to confirm it, really, for her own sake. However, when Mako answered the door with her brilliant smile, she felt that bad energy in her gut melt almost instantaneously.

"Hey," She greeted.

"Well, come on in!" The shorter girl said, and then opened the door wider. Ryuko stepped inside a bit uncomfortably, and then Mako immediately started excitedly leading the way to her room as she had done once before.

Once upstairs, the brunette launched herself energetically onto her own bed, and then looked toward Ryuko from her sprawled-out landing on the mattress. "You can go ahead and set your bag wherever," She told her.

Ryuko chuckled, "Someone seems happy." She set the duffle bag down next to the nearest wall.

Mako sat up and looked at her with big eyes. "Am I usually not?"

She paused in her tracks, puzzled. “I suppose you are.” It was true, she was visibly joyful the majority of the time. But the times she wasn’t were what really left an impression. She dropped this thought quickly, and then looked toward the beanbag chair she had sat in once before.

Mako saw her about to squat over said beanbag chair and spoke, “Oh, you don’t have to sit on that old thing again! Come sit over here with me.” She patted a spot on the mattress near her.

She caught the girl mid-squat. “Are you sure?” She asked, her hands on her knees.

“I mean, unless you prefer that worn out sack of a chair.” Mako shrugged.

Ryuko looked down at it again. “No, you’re right.” She then joined her on her bed, situating herself to sit criss-cross at the end of it. She then looked toward the other teen, kind of expecting her to have a conversation starter…or something to say at all.

Instead, Mako was staring at her very intently. She had also sat up with her legs crossed, and she was leaning over just a bit, as if to stare more intensely at her. Her eyes were incredibly focused, and Ryuko watched as they started to squint at her. It was a very odd ten seconds before the brunette finally spoke, “Why do you have that red streak in your hair?”

The question caught her totally off-guard. She thought of a variety of explanations she could give for the unnatural color in her hair, and she briefly considered each other before she finally settled on the honest reason. No sense in lying. “I think it makes me look cool,” She said, stone-faced, before her expression bloomed into a brilliant grin.

Mako smiled as well, thoroughly enjoying her response. “You’re right, it does.”

“You really think so?” She asked, bringing her hand up to run her fingers through her own bangs, as if to draw attention to the color.

“Definitely!” She said with conviction. “Red is a nice color on you.”

Though it was just small talk, it did wonders to loosen up Ryuko’s countenance. She was beginning to get the sense that maybe she really could get through this, that her and Mako could be good friends without her troublesome feelings getting in the way.

That was, until she looked at the girl again to find her expression suddenly serious again. “Ryuko,” She began. “Are you okay? I mean like, not right at this second, but like, in general?”

It was a very quick transition of topics, and frankly, Ryuko didn’t know how to handle it. Did she catch on to her knowing about her boyfriend without her having told her herself? Was this her way of asking if she was okay with it? Wait, that would insinuate that she knew she would be sad about it, which would also imply that she knew she liked her even the least bit romantically. She quickly found herself stumbling over her own thoughts. “What do you mean by that?”

Mako then lowered her voice considerably, “Are things okay at home? Is something bothering you? I’ve just noticed you being kinda…different lately, I guess. I don’t know, maybe I’m wrong.”

Ryuko was genuinely surprised and somehow flattered Mako had picked up on her attitude shift. She really thought she had been subtle with it. She really, really wanted to ask about her new boyfriend, but if she mentioned it at that moment, it would be evident that that was the concept that was making her act differently, which would imply things she didn’t want implied.

And suddenly, she was just sick of the hurdles she was constantly mentally jumping over. “No, you’re right. It’s just…a lot has been on my mind lately,” She answered indistinctly.

She had been looking away, but when she looked up to Mako’s expression again to see her features expressing the epitome of concern, she was really tempted to pour out her soul. “It’s nothing…really.”

And before Mako could say anything else, she spoke again, “I heard a guy asked you out?” Ryuko asked as though the topic was completely unrelated to the one prior; she sat up taller and put on her supportive face.

The smaller girl tilted her head. “You heard about that?”

Ryuko’s heart sunk at her response already. “Yeah.” She fidgeted with the fabric on her jacket. “People are talking about it, you know, considering he’s a football player and all.” It just occurred to Ryuko that she never even figured out the name of the guy. “Popular and whatnot.”

Mako sighed with an indistinguishable emotion. “Yep. It was kinda, well, awkward, but you know how it goes.”

Ryuko nodded as though she understood, but really she was just feeling her insides crumbling again. Her answer was really vague, but she considered it to be more answer than she needed to confirm her suspicions. There was an off chance she would’ve asked something else about it, but she couldn’t think of a single thing to say –and besides, her throat had closed up.

She didn’t get a chance, anyway, because Mako stood up suddenly then and asked her, “You hungry? I was thinking about making some popcorn ‘er something. I’m starved, myself.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” She said in a very small voice.

“Alright, I’ll go get that started.” She smiled nicely. “Be right back!”

And then she left Ryuko sitting there with her unprocessed thoughts.

As Mako made her way to the kitchen, she thought about Ryuko’s question. She was rather surprised that she had even heard of it happening –it was just so odd. It must’ve really been because Ira was so popular, she figured. He was quarterback, after all, and Ryuko seemed to be pretty in the loop with everyone. She then began to wonder what Ryuko thought of her

now, knowing she rejected a guy. She smiled to herself as she put the bag of popcorn in the microwave; Ryuko must've thought her to be such a heartbreaker, rejecting guys left and right, when in reality Ira was the only guy who had asked her out…well, in high school, at least. She then resolved to shrug it off like she had shrugged off the original situation.

Mako the leaned against the counter as the popcorn popped. Then, something else weighed on her mind -about how Ryuko had seemingly dodged her question. She put her finger to her chin and thought.

It then occurred to Mako that she still knew very little about her past, and that Ryuko only knew some of her own. She decided on her mission for the night: get more knowledge on Ryuko's past…without prying. Ask about her life very generally so that she could share the information only she *wanted* to share. She took the bag of popcorn out of the microwave, poured it into a bowl, and thought more about how exactly she could do that.

When she stepped back into her bedroom, she found Ryuko still sitting at the end of her bed, but this time with her knees drawn to her chest, her expression reading deep thought.

"I got the popcorn!" Mako said in order to announce her arrival.

"Oh, good!" Ryuko responded a little seemingly startled, looking over to her. "Bring it over."

Mako did so happily, resituating herself where she had been before, except this time with a bowl of delicious popcorn between her and the girl across her.

"So, Ryuko," Mako spoke attentively, tossing a piece of popcorn into her mouth. "What's your story?" *Nice*, she thought to herself, *an excellent way to get the ball rolling*.

Ryuko raised her eyebrows at her, and then reached for some popcorn herself. "What do you mean?" Mako's vague questions were odd, but admittedly entertaining to figure out.

"Tell me about your past and stuff!" She waved a hand in a forward motion. "Tell me about what makes Ryuko, Ryuko."

She was amused at her phrasing. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," She answered simply. "Besides marching band! I think I've heard enough about that by now."

"What, are you sure?" Ryuko looked fake-doubtful. "Because I'm sure I could go on, I mean, there's a lot to it. I haven't even told you about-"

"I'm sure!" She said, scooping more popcorn into her face. She wasn't being rude, really, she just knew so much about that already, and she wanted to know about what made her tick rather than how she utilized her musical talent. While she liked hearing about it (hell, she just liked hearing Ryuko *talk*), she knew she understood what she was getting at.

"Hey, if you say so." The corner of her lips quirked upward slightly. "Now, where should I start…" She thought aloud, placing a piece of popcorn on the tip of her tongue and retracting it into her mouth.

“Well, I’ve lived here all my life. Not very exciting, I know. You’d think I’d know more people, but I kinda like keeping to myself.” She sat up a bit. “Actually, in middle school, I used to get into a lot of fights. I had a lot of anger issues, and I was tired of being stepped on by the other kids.”

“What, really?” Mako’s eyes widened. “Did they tease you?”

“Yeah, quite a bit.” She scratched the back of her head awkwardly. “No, if you’re wondering, I never technically *started* the fights, I just…defended myself. Physically.”

“Wow…” She said under her breath.

“Yeah. Eventually, my dad, as well as the principal, said that they were going to give me two options: therapy, or an alternative school. Honestly, at the time it didn’t matter to me very much which option I went with, but the deciding factor ended up being the fact that I was too lazy to have to go through getting used to a new school.” She shrugged. “I went through the therapy, and it really helped with my anger issues.” She took another handful of popcorn.

“That’s good,” Mako said supportively. “I never pegged you to be the angry type. Well, at least not in an irrational way.”

“Oh, definitely.” She looked at her, her eyebrows drawn together in seriousness. “I still kinda am sometimes. Slow people in the hallway, for example.”

She giggled. “I think everyone gets annoyed with that sometimes.”

“Well if everyone was annoyed by it, wouldn’t everyone be walking so slowly less?” She chewed a kernel irritably. “I swear sometimes I just run into people on purpose. Why just stand in the middle of the hallway? People are so inconsiderate,” She grumbled, and then looked up to Mako’s face again to see her eyes wide. “I’m sorry. That stuff just really grinds my gears, ya know?”

“Yeah, I see!” She was quiet a moment, staring at the half-empty bowl of popcorn. “So, more of your story then?”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s right. Well, middle school was pretty rough. But I think it’s that way for everyone. My sister kinda helped me through, though. She liked to scare away the bullies.”

Mako almost choked on her popcorn. “You have a sister?”

Ryuko blinked. “Yeah, haven’t I mentioned her?”

“No!” She shook her head back and forth rapidly.

“Well, yeah, I have an older sister. She’s a year and a half older than me, but she’s pretty smart so she graduated high school last year,” She explained. “Her name is Satsuki. Maybe you’ve heard of her? She was pretty popular in the debate club, but I don’t know.”

“Satsuki…Satsuki…” The brunette chewed on the name. “Tall girl, super long hair, kinda intimidating but sorta in an enchanting way?”

“I’m not sure I would describe her that way, but that sounds about right.” She picked up some of the remaining pieces of popcorn and shoved them in her mouth. “So you know of her then?”

“Yeah, I remember seeing her around the halls, and hearing about her a bit from the other cheerleaders. They were talking about how they didn’t know why she didn’t go out for the squad, what with her frame and all.”

“Her frame?”

“Her build! She’s tall, lean, and super gorgeous.” She twiddled her thumbs. “I can see where they’re coming from, but personally I think she would have stood out a bit.”

“No kidding.” Ryuko chuckled in disbelief. “Satsuki? A cheerleader? She’s the opposite of cheery. I mean, she would have the yelling part covered…her voice just travels. But I just couldn’t see her waving around a pair of pom-poms.” She cracked a smile. “Actually, that mental image is pretty funny.”

Mako startled giggling. “Heh, yeah.”

“Imagine stone-faced Satsuki with her perpetually angry eyebrows shaking around those poofy pom-poms.” She started laughing harder. “Oh my god.”

The smaller girl was still trying to recall her sister’s face better, but she laughed nevertheless. “But! She would also have to do the super cheesy grin. You know, the one where we show all our teeth and hold it until our cheeks are sore.”

“That’s rich. Really.” Ryuko wiped some moisture from the corner of her eye. “But, yeah. She’s graduated and recently off to college, and now it’s just me and my dad back at my house. It’s pretty quiet. Not that she made a ton of noise.”

“Just you and your dad?” She asked. “Not your mom?”

Ryuko looked down at her hands folded in her lap. “My mom…died when I was pretty young. I don’t remember her very well.”

“Your mom…died…” Mako muttered to herself, comprehending the statement. “I’m so sorry,” She said with the utmost sincerity. “I didn’t know.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry! There’s no easy way to mention that. Really, since I never knew her that well, it’s not a huge deal.” She looked up at her nicely. “We were just laughing with each other, no need to get all down.”

“Well, if you say so. I’m gonna feel sympathetic for you anyway.” She crossed her arms.

“If you insist.” She put her hands up in resignation. “Not gonna stop you. But besides those things, I guess that’s all the important things there really are to me: used to be a delinquent, have a big sister and a dead mother, and love being in marching band.”

Mako suddenly felt like mentioning something else, maybe asking to confirm the gayness she was almost sure of about this girl, but how does one ask about that? She thought that to be a significant part of someone's character…maybe. Then, she had the perfect idea, and she didn't really think about much before it escaped her mouth. "Ever dated anybody?"

Ryuko stared at her for a moment, expressionless, and then she spoke very quietly, "No, actually."

To Mako's disappointment, she didn't offer any more information. In fact, the question seemed to deflate her, and suddenly she felt a bit bad again. Before she could redeem herself, Ryuko spoke again, "What about you?"

"What about me?" Mako squeaked.

"What about your life story?" She placed her elbow on her knee and put her jaw in her palm. "I mean, I know you've already told me a lot about yourself, but I think that was just surface stuff. What makes Mako, Mako?"

"Weeell," She thought a second. "Actually, my family moved around a bit before we settled here," She started immediately. "I've only lived here since I was about ten, but the most important years of my life have been spent here, I think."

"I was never necessarily a problem child," She continued, "just really lazy. I didn't like class work. I was a very curious child and just wanted to explore all the time. I didn't have the patience to just sit all cooped up in a classroom all day." She frowned. "I think this made my mom sad, because she said she knows I 'have potential' and should just 'apply myself'. But honestly, I just can never stay focused!" She took a breath. "That's why I'm not in honors classes or anything."

"Ah, that's no big deal!" Ryuko waved a hand. "Honors classes are overrated."

"You've been in an honors class before?" She tilted her head.

"Well, no," She admitted. "But I can tell you this! None of that kinda stuff defines you. I learned that pretty early, and I never let it bother me. Mako, your curiosity and your thoughtfulness is what makes you smart. Academics are so glorified nowadays."

"Thanks, Ryuko," She spoke genuinely. "Psh, 'thoughtfulness'. If anyone's thoughtful, it's you. I mean, listen to you."

"I don't know about all that…" Her bangs hid her eyes a bit.

"Anyway…" Mako continued. "So, yeah, I'm not the smartest, we went through that…" She recounted quietly, and Ryuko frowned, but didn't interrupt her process. "Ooh! Also, I look up to my parents quite a bit. I wanna be a big successful doctor someday like my dad, and then hopefully be at least half as good at cooking as my mom. They really have supported me all the way!"

“That’s really great, Mako. Those are honest ambitions.” She smiled at her endearingly. “I think you’d make a great doctor.”

Mako looked at her in wonder. “You really think so?”

Ryuko was practically hypnotized by the twinkle in her eye. “Yeah…yeah, you’re really good at caring for people. I think you’d make a hell of a killing saving lives.”

The smaller girl put a hand to her mouth and laughed. “You said ‘make a killing’ while ‘saving lives’…”

Ryuko smirked, seeing what she meant. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” She spoke. “So! As I mentioned, my mom is an awesome cook, and-” She looked toward the clock on the wall: it read 7:30. “-I think it’s about time for dinner!” She looked down at the empty bowl atop her comforter. “Even though we just ate all this popcorn.”

“I could still eat,” She said without hesitation.

Mako smiled. “We’re kinda excessive with our eating in this house. Hope you don’t mind.” She stood up from the bed, and then offered Ryuko a hand to help her up.

“Mind *food*? I don’t think I could.” She put her hand in hers without thinking, and found it to be really soft, which she tried not to notice. Once she was up, though, she released her hand and allowed her to lead the way.

The dinner took about half an hour to finish, and Ryuko finally got to meet Mako’s entire family. Her little brother was admittedly obnoxious, but he was at least entertaining. Actually, the whole family was –they were super nice and all of them were funny in their own ways, even if they were a bit overbearing. She thought her dad would be a bit more level-headed what with his prestigious profession, but he also turned out to be the epitome of goofy. Ryuko found it refreshing. Not to mention the spaghetti her mom made was just the best.

When the girls made their way back up to Mako’s room, they were all smiles. Ryuko hadn’t felt more relaxed and jovial for as long as she could remember. Not that she was consistently stressed about things, just that she didn’t always get the opportunity to laugh this much.

Ryuko immediately went back to sit on her plush bed, but Mako made her way to her dresser, where she had an iPod dock. “What kind of music do you like?” The younger teen asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Oh, anything really,” She answered. “But I really like alternative rock.”

She smiled then turned back around. “Predictable.” There was a moment of silence as she scrolled through her music library. “You like Imagine Dragons?”

“Yeah! Haven’t heard all of their stuff, though. But I’ve liked what I’ve heard,” She explained.

“Well then, you’re in luck. This is from their new album and it’s just tops.” She pressed ‘play’, and the song *Polaroid* came on. She made her way back over to the bed.

“This is nice,” Ryuko commented as she began lightly bobbing to the beat. Mako smiled widely at this, and then sat down again next to her. The darker haired girl couldn’t help but notice she was a little closer than she had been before.

“Thought we could use some tunes,” She said as she then laid down suddenly, her legs draping over the edge of the bed as she was situated parallel to her pillows. She looked up at Ryuko, who was just sitting there, looking down at her.

“Comfortable?” The taller girl asked, amused.

“Mhm!” She nodded.

Ryuko didn’t really know what to do with the girl sprawled out next to her. Not that she had to do something necessarily, it’s just that she felt a little odd sitting up all properly when Mako was obviously so comfortable lying all over the place. That was okay, she decided, because the girl didn’t seem to think anything of it. Suddenly, Ryuko felt even more at ease somehow.

Just as she was about to ask Mako another casual question about her life and maybe her music taste, the smaller girl and picked up her hand. Ryuko was startled, to say the least, and even flinched a bit. She looked over to see the girl holding her hand spread above her face, almost as though she were inspecting it.

Before she could say anything about it, Mako spoke, “You have calluses.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“From drumming?”

“Probably,” She spoke quietly.

“I noticed when I helped you up from my bed.” Her thumbs gently brushed across the toughened skin. “You should use some lotion or something,” She suggested.

“Oh, I…don’t own any lotion.” She shifted slightly. “Never really paid much attention to my hands.”

“I see…” Mako said, seemingly deep in focus. She then bent her fingers down a bit and looked at her nails. “That would explain your nails, too. Do you bite them?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s a bad habit.” Ryuko felt her blush intensifying.

The brunette peeked from behind her hand. “Do you get anxious a lot?”

“I…I don’t think so?” Then she realized that at that very moment, she had a strong urge to chew the nails on the hand that wasn’t in Mako’s. “Okay, maybe.”

“Well, tell you what,” Mako started, placing the girl’s hand back in her own lap. “I’ve got some nice lotion and a nail file. How about I fix up those hands of yours?” She smiled, and stood from the bed again.

Ryuko stared at her for a moment, her heart beating hard. This was another one of those countless moments it occurred to her just how unusual Mako really was. “Yeah, you can… you can do that if you want.”

She had already started rifling through her things, but she said, “Only if *you* want. They’re your hands.”

Ryuko looked down at said hands. “Nah, you’re right. I suppose they could use some work.”

“Great!” Mako beamed, facing her with a bottle of lotion and a nail file in hand. “We’ll start with your calluses,” She said, getting back onto the bed. She crossed her legs and sat closer to Ryuko than she had yet, and in response the taller girl turned so that she was facing her directly.

Even though her whole room had a specific scent, it was much more noticeable when Mako was in such close proximity to her. Then, she realized that it was her room smelled like her, and not the other way around. It was borderline intoxicating, and Ryuko found herself breathing more deeply.

Mako then graciously picked up one of Ryuko’s hands from her lap. She turned it palm-up in her own hands, and then grabbed the bottle of lotion next to her and squeezed just a dab right into the center.

“Ah-” Ryuko gasped. “-cold.”

“Oh, sorry! Here,” She said, dipping both of her thumb pads into the lotion and spreading it generously about the surface of her palm. “Better?”

“Yeah…” She shivered slightly. “You’re really good at this.”

“Thanks,” Mako grinned. She paid special attention to the calluses at the base of her fingers, rubbing those with extra pressure. She really didn’t hold back as she dug her thumbs into her palm, and Ryuko bit her lip because it felt really nice.

Her forearms moved as she worked, and suddenly she asked, “Are you cold, Ryuko?”

“Uh, not really…” She responded quietly.

“Are you sure? You have goosebumps.”

“Oh, do I?” She looked down to her own arms. Mako shook her head and continued to rub, eventually wearing out her palm and then began running her thumb and fingers against Ryuko’s own fingers.

The taller girl took a deep breath, feeling the girl’s already soft hands, now smooth with lotion, grace her fingertips. She remained completely still, scared somehow that if she moved

at all, she would stop. As she inhaled, she caught the aroma of the lotion she was using –it smelled of flowers and something else sweet.

To avoid a further lull in conversation and also to fulfill her light curiosity, she decided to ask. “What kind of lotion is this?”

“Oh, it’s this body lotion my mom gave me. It’s patchouli, lavender and vanilla scented,” She informed. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s really…pleasant. It’s not too fragrant, it’s nice.” She smiled at her.

“I’m glad you think so,” She said, gripping kindly her hand in her own two. “Other hand?”

“Oh, yeah, here,” She said, shakily offering her other hand to her. She started working on it immediately, applying just the right amount of lotion. Ryuko’s other finished hand settled on her own knee and she could have sworn it was tingling. She stared at it for a moment, almost as though it wasn’t even her own.

She stretched the fingers to the aforementioned hand so that she could see the fingernails Mako was to be filing in a bit. The girl was right; they really were in pretty bad shape. Not that she had put it exactly like that, but that’s what they were. She really should stop biting her nails, she decided.

Meanwhile, Mako was still doing an excellent job of thoroughly relaxing every muscle in her hand. She briefly wondered how good the girl would be at massaging other parts of the body, and just as quickly she stored that thought away in her mental recycle bin.

Even though her thoughts had been occupied, she found herself thinking about what Mako might be thinking at that moment. She looked to her concentrating eyes –though they were focused on her hand, she seemed to be in her own little world. This was good, at least, because that meant that their silence probably wasn’t awkward to her, either.

At that moment, Mako happened to be thinking about how grateful she was that Ryuko was letting her do this. She really didn’t think she’d agree to it; she seems incredibly protective of her personal space. And maybe, she was defensive of it in reality…maybe she was letting her do this because she was just that comfortable around her. But that was wishful thinking.

Mako found herself wanting to be as close to her as possible. Maybe someday, Ryuko would be as protective over Mako as she was over her space. Her cheeks began to color at the direction her thoughts were going, and she decided for her own sake that she’d bring her focus back to rubbing the girl’s hand.

When she was done, she decided she’d dance her fingertips very, very lightly over the surface of Ryuko’s palm, just for the sole purpose of tickling her and getting a reaction.

What happened next surprised the both of them: a series of considerably high-pitched giggles emanated from the taller girl, and her neck seized up for just a second.

Mako looked at her in amazement. “Ryuko, are you ticklish?”

“Who isn’t?” She blushed hard in embarrassment, dodging her gaze.

“True,” She said, entertained. “Now, are you ready for filing? I gotta say, it’s not a very pleasant feeling. Certainly not as nice as a hand massage.”

“That’s alright,” She assured. Honestly, she just didn’t want her physical contact with Mako to stop. “It needs to be done.”

The shorter girl nodded once, and then picked up the nail file. She then flipped over Ryuko’s hand in her own and held up the file to her pinky fingernail first. As she began scraping against her nail, Ryuko winced impulsively.

“I know, I know,” Mako soothed. “Just bear through it, alright?”

Soon enough, she got through the first nail, and then raised the nail really close to her mouth and blew on it to get rid of the residue –the action momentarily caught Ryuko off guard. She did eventually bear through it all, though, and soon enough she was finished.

Ryuko then inspected her freshly filed nails, impressed by her work. Mako really did have an eye for detail. Speaking of whom, the girl was just radiating happiness, smiling at her with notable pride. Not really thinking through her next move, Ryuko then looked up from her own nails and then reached over and picked up one of Mako’s hands. She just wanted to see the girl’s own nails, which turned out to be a very nice shade of pastel blue.

“Your nails are very pretty,” She complimented. “This shade of blue suits you.”

“Thank you, Ryuko…” Mako mumbled, her hand going limp in Ryuko’s.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” Ryuko said, gently placing the girl’s hand back in her lap.

“It’s no big deal,” She spoke, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “So…” She looked at the clock: it was already nine! “Are you tired yet?”

“No, not really,” She admitted.

“Me neither. Hey, what kind of movies do you like? I know my TV isn’t huge, but I’ve got Netflix…” She suggested, and then grabbed the nearby remote to turn on the set, which was situated at the foot of the bed (she had it that way so she could watch while lying down).

“I really like horror movies,” She answered, and then scooted against the wall so Mako could see the television from where she was sitting.

Mako then faced her with wide eyes. “Horror movies?” She gulped.

Ryuko smirked at her poorly shrouded trepidation. Then, she decided to egg it on just for kicks. “Yeah, you know, paranormal, thriller, serial killer-y stuff. Why, don’t *you* like horror movies?” She teased.

“Oh, y-yeah! They’re super, uh, exciting,” She said with conviction as she clicked through various Netflix titles, not meeting Ryuko’s eyes.

The taller girl chuckled. “We don’t have to watch a horror movie if you don’t want to, Mako.”

“No, really! If you like horror movies, we can watch one,” She insisted, scooting back into her pillows. “I just…don’t like being alone when they’re on, but I’m not alone, so…”

The only word Ryuko could think of at that moment was *adorable*, but she tried to ignore it. And then, Mako spoke again, “How about you choose one while I change into my jammies?”

She took the remote from her offering hand and just stared at it for a second. “Alright,” She agreed, facing the television and clicking down to the horror section.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Mako didn’t plan on leaving the room to change, and accidentally caught an eyeful of the girl’s panty-covered backside. She immediately brought a hand to cover her peripheral vision, already feeling bad for seeing what she did.

It was her innate and inevitable attraction to the girl that brought Ryuko back to earth. For the majority of the evening, she was able to put Mako’s relationship status out of mind. But now…now it was back, and she found herself increasingly jealous of this boy she didn’t even know the name of.

Mako hopped back into bed wearing polka-dotted fleece pajama pants and a loose white v-neck; she looked incredibly cozy. “Did you choose a movie?” She gazed at her innocently.

“Uh, yeah!” The selection had landed on the title *Ouija*. “It’s pretty scary, though.”

“I will watch it!” She put on her super determined face. “Hey, do you have jammies you want to change into?” Her voice got smaller, almost as though there was a certain answer she was hoping for.

“Oh yeah, I brought some,” She answered. “Let me just change into those before we start the movie.”

“Can do!” Mako said.

Ryuko got up and made her way over to her duffle bag and pulled out a super baggy t-shirt and flannel pajama shorts. She thought about changing right where she was standing like how Mako had, and then glanced over to the girl. She seemed to be distracted by her phone by the moment, so she thought ‘why not’.

She changed her clothes relatively quickly, as she was eager to be comfy as well as near Mako again. She got back on top of the bed, and Mako clicked play. Just as soon as she did that, another question popped up immediately as Ryuko vocalized it, “Hey Mako, where am I going to sleep tonight?”

Mako blinked at her a moment, and then her eyes darted back and forth from the television to Ryuko a few times and then paused to movie before she answered, “I was just gonna let you

sleep up here with me, unless you don't want to…i-if that makes you uncomfortable, I could set up some real comfy blankets and pillows up for you on the floor, or-"

"No that's fine, you don't have to go to the trouble, I don't mind sleeping up here," She swallowed, "I suppose." The girl's bed was only a twin-sized, and it didn't take a genius to realize that there wouldn't be a lot of space between them if she were to sleep up there.

"Are you sure?" Mako regarded her seriously. "I tend to hog the covers."

At this, Ryuko laughed genuinely. "That won't be a problem. But I warn you, so do I…I can wrestle them my way if I have to."

"In your dreams!" She challenged.

"Yeah, we'll see." She grinned. There was a brief moment of silence before she uttered, "So…"

"Oh, right! Here," The smaller girl said, scrambling off of her bed. Then, unexpectedly, she started chucking all of her stuffed animals Ryuko's way, if only to get them out of her way. She then peeled back the comforter as well as the sheets far enough to get beneath them, and then proceeded to do so. "This is my side of the bed," She announced. "You can have that side." She gestured to the available side with the flick of her head.

"Thanks," She spoke, amused. Then, she cautiously crawled over to the head of the bed and, with some difficulty, wiggled her way under the blankets. There, she noticed two things immediately: her pillows her unnaturally fluffy, and the sheets smelled incredibly fresh.

"Cozy now?" Mako asked, glancing over to the girl next to her.

"Incredibly," She answered.

"Good." She responded, the smile evident in her voice. "Ooh, forgot to turn out the lights!" She got out of bed quickly, flipped off the light switch, and then slid right back into her spot. "Okay, ready?"

"Yeah," Ryuko said, turning her attention toward the television.

"Alright!" Mako spoke valiantly and clicked play once more.

The movie was admittedly frightening; even Ryuko herself was beginning to get the ever-present urge to bite her nails again. She noticed Mako keeping only her eyes above the covers with her eyebrows knit together in concern, her hands holding a death grip over the edge of the comforter.

It was about halfway through the movie that Mako had resorted to curling up right up against Ryuko, and she didn't stop her. She was really warm, and she seemed like she really needed to physical comfort. Then, another fourth of the way through the movie, she noticed the smaller girl had fallen into a deep sleep…with a smile on her face.

Ryuko had stayed awake throughout the whole movie, and then took the liberty to turn the television off at the end of it. Then, she slid a little further under the covers in order to get snug, incredibly careful not to disturb Mako. Despite her efforts, the brunette roused gently in her sleep, but instead of scooting away, she scooted even closer. Then, much to Ryuko's bewilderment, she even wrapped a loose arm around her torso.

It took her another good half an hour before her heart slowed down enough for her to fall into a very comfortable slumber.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up being super long!! PLEASE comment your feelings about this chapter, and maybe some outcomes you're hoping for ;-)

Chapter 8: Some Confirmation

The next morning, Ryuko was woken up by Mako shifting next to her. She wondered if she was reacting adversely to the fact that she seemed to cuddle against her in her sleep, but when she looked over she discovered she was just checking her phone. She wondered what she was looking at, but it was really none of her business. Then, she saw Mako's expression shift to something along the lines of distaste at something that had come up on her screen.

"Good morning," Ryuko said quietly, the sleepiness still evident in her voice.

"Oh, Ryuko! I didn't know you were awake. Good morning." She smiled over at her.

"Texting someone?" She didn't want to seem like she was prying, so she asked very casually.

"Yeah," She said, and sighed lightly. "Ira."

Ryuko propped herself up on her elbow. "Who's Ira?" She asked curiously.

Mako looked at her. She thought they'd already been over this, but maybe she just never found out the name of the guy. She thought it to be unlikely, because Ryuko seemed to find out about everything. Nevertheless, she clarified, "The guy who asked me out."

"Oh," Ryuko tried to speak, but her voice didn't quite come out. "Hey, what time is it?"

"Almost nine-thirty," Mako answered, distracted by her phone.

"Well, uh, my dad wanted me to be home by ten, so I should probably…" Her words came out unstructured. "Should probably get going," She spoke almost absentmindedly as she got out from under the covers with some difficulty.

"You're not even gonna stay for breakfast?" She sounded incredibly disappointed. "My mom makes some mean pancakes!"

"No, I really…really gotta get going." She swallowed, and then finally got around to standing up. She walked over to her duffle bag and her shoes, and Mako just stared at her as she began slipping on said shoes.

"You're not gonna change out of your jammies first?"

"I'm only going to be in my car, don't think it matters too much." She slung the bag over her shoulder. "See you later, Mako," She said, grabbing her car keys out of a pocket on her bag. She then hastily exited the room.

Mako just sat in her bed dumbfounded for a moment before she suddenly scrambled out of it and down her staircase. She made it to the living room just as the front door closed on Ryuko's way out. She approached the door and watched through the small window on it as the girl fast-walked to her car, got in it, and drove away.

Mako's mom peeked from the doorway of the kitchen and spoke, "Was that Ryuko?"

She turned to her mother, "Yeah, she just left."

"So early?" She frowned. "But I made so many pancakes."

"Sorry mom, I'll have to pass on the pancakes for now," She said, she shoulders slumped as she approached her staircase again. She practically crawled back up the stairs and into her room, and then flopped face-first back on her bed.

After a few moments of silence (save for the ticking of her wall clock), she realized that she had yet to respond to the text Ira had sent her, which only read, '*Hey* '

She turned her cheek on her mattress, and then typed out her response, '*Hi* '

'*You have first lunch, right? Could you meet me in the cafeteria tomorrow?* ' He was straight to the point.

She wondered how he knew she had first lunch, but then figured he probably just saw her in the cafeteria before the same time he was there. She figured she had nothing to lose, so she responded, '*Sure* ' Maybe she'd have someone new to sit with, she thought optimistically. Then, she found herself wondering which lunch period Ryuko had, and if she just hadn't seen her during lunch. She was probably the type to go out for lunch.

Then, her phone buzzed, '*Great! I'll see you there* '

She couldn't think of something else to respond with, so she didn't. Instead, she briefly considered texting Ryuko, but some instinct deep inside her advised against it. She didn't think she'd be able to handle it well if Ryuko didn't respond to whatever she would say, so she decided against going there altogether.

Meanwhile, Ryuko had just arrived back at her house and was in great need of a distraction. She mindlessly made her way back to her room, flung the duffle bag somewhere amidst all the junk on her bedroom floor, and landed on her bed. She laid there for a moment, waiting for her thoughts to settle. Then, she felt incredibly stupid…again.

She was so wary of inappropriately temperamental people, but who was she? She just impulsively left her friend's house just because she was texting her boyfriend. Who does that? So much for being supportive. She slapped her palm to her face in exhaustion, and then sighed deeply because her hand still smelled of the lotion Mako had used on it a day prior.

She couldn't get out of her mind the way her touch was firm, yet gentle at the same time. She held her hand up and watched the light from her overhead lighting spill between her fingers. She thought about the parallels between Mako's touch and the volatile tendencies of her personality. It occurred to her instantly how cheesy that was and, not wanting her thoughts to go any further, she pulled her laptop over from her nightstand and wasted the rest of her Sunday on the internet.

The following Monday was pretty run-of-the-mill. Ryuko woke up feeling a bit disoriented and by second hour, she realized she was running low on cash and didn't have enough go to out for lunch that day. This was fine -she'd just have to eat one of the cafeteria's lunches and cross her fingers hoping that it wasn't too revolting that day.

The food ended up appearing to be edible at the least –mediocre, but edible. She piled her tray high and then made her way back to the tables to see if there were any band kids she could sit with or something. However, the aisle was blocked by a small crowd gathering in the middle of it.

Ryuko, wondering if it was a fight or something, willingly stepped in amongst the other students. What she saw caused her to freeze in her tracks.

In the center of the small crowd stood a shocked looking Mako, gripping tightly onto her lunch tray. Next to her towered a tall boy (the quarterback Ira, she suddenly recognized) who was staring down at her and holding a very well-flourished bouquet of flowers that still managed to look diminutive in his large hands. His lips were drawn into a tight frown, yet he was blushing darkly and seemed to be coated in sweat.

The second Ryuko saw the both of them seemed to last forever. Just as she regained control of her limbs and found it in her to turn around and start striding off hastily in the opposite direction, Mako caught sight of her and her thoroughly appalled expression. The brunette girl looked up to Ira in a panicked manner for a second, dropped her tray on a nearby table, and then pushed through the gathering crowd in pursuit of Ryuko. However, once she was away from the clump of students, she completely lost track of her.

Ryuko had left her tray on an unattended table and left the cafeteria. She had no idea where she was headed, but it was anywhere except the room she came from. Then, as a spur of the moment decision, she decided she'd go to her car –she was guaranteed to be alone there.

She quickly pulled her car keys from her backpack, unlocked the vehicle, and climbed into the driver's seat. She then held onto the steering wheel with a vice-like grip, touching her forehead to the hot leather and trying hard to stabilize her breathing. *Get it together*, she chanted to herself quietly, *get it together*.

She had known that's what was happening. She knew that's what that meant –that Mako… that Mako was dating someone, that Mako was not gay, but she just really, really didn't need to see it with her own two eyes. She didn't need the reality of it so blatantly presented to her, and in such a spontaneous fashion. She was fighting back the moisture gathering in her eyes, really *choking back* the tears, because she *refused* to reach that point...the point of no return…even if deep inside, she knew she was already there.

How does somebody stop having feelings for a friend?

Mako went about the rest of her day deeply concerned about Ryuko. She really couldn't wait for fifth hour, just so she could talk to her. But then the younger teen found herself wondering what exactly she was to say to her. Why had Ryuko reacted to negatively to the scene? Hadn't she known that-

It just then occurred to Mako that maybe, just maybe, Ryuko had no idea Mako had rejected Ira's romantic advancements.

At first, this idea seemed absurd; Ryuko was able to find information about anything and everyone! She had obviously heard of the incident, so logically, why wouldn't she have heard what had actually happened?

Then, it also occurred to Mako that Ira had thought she had said yes to him at first, and considering this was high school, a breeding ground for rumors, it could very easily get spread that they were an item. She supposed it didn't help that he also planned this super romantic and bold gesture in an effort to win over her affections and Ryuko happened to see it go down.

While she was feeling stupid about the whole thing even though she knew it wasn't her fault, she had another massive epiphany. Ryuko wouldn't…Ryuko wouldn't react so visibly and negatively to these occurrences unless she felt strongly about them one way or the other, right?

Mako was on a roll with these deductions, and had successfully distracted herself from watching where she was going in the hallway, walking toward her fifth hour, and had bumped into quite a few people. This was hardly noticeable, though, because the world seemed to stop around her.

Did Ryuko have feelings for her?

Mako felt her pulse speed up, and she hid her face behind the textbook and folders she was holding as she walked. She was trying not to let this possibility delude her (that's what she kept repeating to herself, a mere *possibility*), but she practically floated her way to the classroom anyway. The class she shared with Ryuko.

However, when she stepped in through the doorway, the girl was nowhere to be found. And the bell had just rung, too.

While she was initially disappointed, she immediately made light of the situation; she now had time to organize her thoughts (and potential feelings) regarding the situation, without having to be distracted by Ryuko's actual presence. She didn't waste too much time dwelling on the reason as to why she wasn't actually there during that hour.

The class passed by rather quickly, courtesy of her thoughts as well as the nap that consumed the latter portion of the hour. The second she finally got off the bus and into her home, she dived onto her bed, yanked out her phone, and pulled up a new message template to Ryuko.

She was going to use Ryuko's fifth hour absence as a conversation starter, but then she noticed something else –Ryuko had left her jacket in her room when she left the previous day. She wondered how she had not noticed it yesterday. Instinctively, she sat up and picked it up from the foot of her bed. Before she knew what she was doing, she sniffed it gently and, not so surprisingly, it smelled strongly of Ryuko.

Mako felt her heart clench momentarily, and then she set the jacket in her lap and gave her attention back to her phone. She put on her determined face, and then resolutely typed out, '*Hey!!* '

'*Hi* ' She received back.

'*You know you left your jacket at my house,* ' She typed out, and then looked back at the jacket. '*It's a very nice jacket.* '

'*...so that's where I left it* ' She received next, and Mako smiled.

'*Mhm!* ' She paused a moment, considering exactly what to say next. '*So…why weren't you in class today? It was pretty boring without you, you know.* '

Mako waited a long five minutes. Then, an even longer ten minutes. Finally, the longest stretch of twenty minutes before she accepted Ryuko wasn't going to reply to her text. From this, she lastly figured, she received a little more reason to back up her suspicion: there was a good chance Ryuko had a crush on her…even though there was really no way for her to be sure, unless she asked. The idea of doing so was absolutely terrifying.

Over the following twenty three-ish hours, Mako had tried her best to sleep through the night and then to focus in her classes the next day, which had never been easy for her in the first place. She tried to keep her cool about the entire situation she was dealing with all by herself, but by the time the ever-emphasized fifth hour rolled around she all but jogged her way to the classroom.

This time, when Ryuko was again not present, she knew she couldn't wait a whole new series of hours upon hours to clear things up and furthermore, just to see her again. She pulled out her phone to shoot her another text.

Meanwhile, Ryuko was indeed skipping. In fact, she had also roped Nonon into this softly delinquent activity (not that Nonon was entirely opposed to the activity; she wanted to support her friend and didn't like her fifth hour anyway). The two of them were sitting in Ryuko's car where, thankfully, the dark haired girl didn't have to be alone with her feelings again.

"Ryuko," Nonon started quietly. "This is really tearing you up," She spoke in an exhausted tone.

Ryuko inhaled slowly, and then exhaled in a sigh. "I know." She looked at her. "What do you suggest I do about it?"

"Well, you're avoiding her." She acknowledged. "You can't solve your problems by ignoring them."

"Can't I, though?" She questioned. "Can't I, if the problem is a person?"

"Especially not if they're a person!" Nonon reasoned. "And especially not if you want to pass anatomy."

Just as the pink-haired girl spoke, Ryuko's phone vibrated loudly in the cup holder, indicating the arrival of a text message. For a second, the two of them just stared at it, both of them perfectly aware at the overwhelming likelihood that it was Mako.

"Check your phone," Nonon advised sternly.

Ryuko took a breath, and then did so. "It says…" She spoke slowly, comprehending the message. "It says she wants me to meet her after school. That means she knows I'm skipping, and not out sick or something…"

Nonon rolled her eyes, and the taller teen continued, "What should I say?"

"Say yes!" She said, as though the answer were blindingly obvious. "She obviously has something to say to you, so why don't you just let her?"

"You're right." Ryuko acknowledged. "You're right, I just…no, yeah, I'll do it." She focused her attention back on her phone, and then typed an adequate response conveying her consent to the arrangement.

The two girls were silent a few moments before she received her next response. "What'd she say now?" Nonon asked immediately.

"She says that…we can meet in the back area of the parking lot." Ryuko looked out the window. "Isn't that like, right over there?" She gestured to a nearby open area in the parking lot.

"Yeah," She confirmed. "So, you're going to?"

"Don't I kinda have to?"

"Yes!" Nonon enforced.

After that, Ryuko texted Mako her confirmation of the location, and then went back to venting her feelings and opinions to Nonon. About halfway through the hour, however, their topic of discussion started slipping into other areas, and by the time the class was about to end, Ryuko had been laughing pretty hard at some of the things they talked about with each other and Nonon's slightly crude sense of humor.

So when Nonon respectively exited the parking lot and allowed Ryuko to meet Mako after the bell rang, Ryuko was actually in a very good mood. She watched as Mako began approaching her, and time seemed to slow.

"Ryuko!" She said, and then cleared the rest of the distance between them with a tight hug. "I figured you'd get here before me. Were you hiding out in your car?"

Ryuko was surprised she had figured as much. "Yeah," She admitted.

Mako released her from her grasp and looked up at her face, just to find her expression worrisome. "Ryuko…" She uttered, furrowing her brow. "Come, let's sit on the curb."

Ryuko followed her lead to the hard concrete curb, and then sat down next to her. Mako had folded her hands neatly in her lap, and was staring off into the blue afternoon sky. Her brain was observably processing many things at once. When she opened her mouth to speak, Ryuko expected something very deep. “I have your jacket in my backpack.” is what she ended up saying.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, here,” She said, taking the backpack off her back by a single strap, pulling out a wadded up jacket. She then handed it to the girl.

“Thanks,” Ryuko said, not knowing where to put it at the moment, and eventually decided to drape it over her own forearm. “So…what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Ryuko,” She spoke, finally making established eye contact with the dark-haired girl. “I’m gay.” She had tried to say so in a very firm manner, but her voice kind of wavered a bit.

Ryuko stared right back at her for a moment, her eyes very serious and her breath caught in her throat. “You’re…” She shook her head. “You’re gay?”

Mako raised her eyebrows and nodded at the girl very slowly, getting it through to her that she was not joking.

“So you’re not…dating Ira?” She asked quietly.

“Not even for a second.” The brunette gazed at her, instilling a sense of sincerity.

Ryuko was very quiet for a moment as she processed this information. Then, she slapped a palm to her own face and started laughing rather loudly. “Oh, man,” She said and, once she settled down a bit, smiled. “I was under the impression this whole time that you guys were – hey, what about the flowers he was giving you, then?” She interrupted herself.

Mako rolled her eyes subtly at the recent memory. “He’s the kind of guy who doesn’t give up, you know? He has good intentions, really. He just doesn’t know when to quit.”

“Even after he knew you’re gay?”

The smaller girl looked down at her lap. “He doesn’t know I’m gay,” She admitted softly.

“Oh,” Ryuko said, picking up on an entirely new emotion behind that reasoning. Something told her now was not the time to ask about it, though.

“So, yeah!” The younger teen spoke up again, patting her hands on her knees. “I know you had asked about it before, but I assumed you had already known about it so I didn’t really go into because frankly, rejecting people is not something I find super fun to talk about,” She explained in a rushed manner, yet Ryuko nodded at her understandingly.

“Also,” She continued, “I figured that if I wanted to be closer friends with you, I shouldn’t keep such an important part of my identity a secret!” She stood up from the curb. “Not that it defines who I am or anything, obviously, *you* thought *I* was dating Ira.”

“Yeah, well, me and the rest of the school!” She defended, still having trouble containing her smile. She then stood up from the concrete as well.

“Psh, you should know better,” She teased, not even commenting on the fact that Ryuko implied she was wildly popular. I mean, the gossip was, but that’s beside the point.

Following this, there was a semi-awkward silence of reasonable length as their emotions settled before Mako spoke again, “Well, I didn’t tell my parents I was gonna stay after school, so, I should probably be going…”

“I can give you a ride home,” Ryuko offered without second thought.

Mako grinned up at her. “That would be nice.”

Chapter 9: Red

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone!! As some of you may know, this fic was intended to be finished by the time March began, but I'm just not so sure that's going to happen! Don't get me wrong, it is almost finished. For time's sake, however, I will be posting one chapter right now (this one) and then another chapter (chapter 10) this evening. I figured why not since I already have both of them written!! But yeah, after those two there'll still be 4 or so chapters left. But don't worry, the confession is very soon!! Thanks.

The next morning during band class, Ryuko was all smiles. Nonon noticed this immediately and began interrogating heavily about what had happened after she left that parking lot. Ryuko, however, was not holding back –she wanted to proclaim to the world what had happened that previous afternoon.

“Wait, so Mako is gay?” Nonon collected. “I told you not to jump to conclusions!”

“I know, I know,” She said, still smiling like an idiot. “But hey! You were the one who told me she was dating a football player in the first place. That whole thing was partially your fault.” Her expression turned stern.

“In my defense, that’s just what I was told.” She held up her hands defensively. “Anyway, *I* told *you* to find out for yourself, which you never did.”

“I tried,” She grumbled mostly to herself. “That’s all in the past now, so.”

“Exactly!” The pink-haired girl said, slinging an arm around her shoulder. “So, did you ask her out then?”

Ryuko sighed. “No.”

“Why not?” Nonon whined.

“Just because she’s gay doesn’t mean she’s interested in me!”

“Yeah, but she could be!” She said and, before Ryuko had a chance to respond, continued, “Hey, you know what would be a cool idea? If the three of us all hung out sometime,” She suggested. “I could be like, your wingman. Wingwoman.”

The taller teen could tell the idea was obviously something she had already thought through a bit. “Where would we even hang out?”

“Oh, I don’t know, the mall or something!” She said, releasing her friend. “People still go there, right?”

“I think,” Ryuko spoke, trying to remember the last time she’d even been to their local mall. “But I guess we could make it fun if we have to, huh?”

“Definitely!” Nonon said enthusiastically.

“Oh, but what day? It has to be a day we don’t have practice.”

The shorter girl was silent a second in thought. “That would be tomorrow. Is that alright?”

“I can ask Mako in fifth hour and then text you the plans?” Ryuko suggested.

“That should work. God, this is gonna be sweet!” Nonon smiled. It never failed to amaze Ryuko how involved the girl liked to get in her gay endeavors. She was just a really good friend, she realized for the umpteenth time, and felt incredibly grateful that she had her unwavering support.

By the time fifth hour rolled around, Ryuko was giddy with excitement. Not just because of their arrangement for the next day, but also because she was extremely eager just to see Mako again. She felt like they had gotten a fresh start and, now that she knew the truth, she felt much more confident. Logically, she could’ve just texted her to ask if she was available to hang out the next day, but she’d really rather convey her enthusiasm in person.

She got to the classroom like she usually had in previous days. When Mako stepped into the room, she almost couldn’t even wait for her to cross the room and get to her seat.

“Hi, Ryuko!”

“Hey!” She said, keeping her composure. “So, hey…”

“Hm?” She sat down her in seat next to her.

“Nonon and I thought it’d be cool if the three of us could all hang out together. We were wondering if you’d like to come to the mall with us tomorrow. We could all go in my car after school –it’d be fun,” She offered.

“Ooh, that does sound like fun!” Mako agreed. “But I don’t have any spending money.” She frowned.

“That’s okay, we don’t have to buy anything,” Ryuko explained. “We just wanted to hang out and all get to know each other a little better.”

“Okay!” She sounded wholehearted. “But I can’t say I won’t end up wanting to buy a lot of stuff anyway…even if I can’t. Malls can be very tempting,” She said in a warning tone. “But yeah, that’ll probably be fine with my parents.”

“Good.” Ryuko smiled.

The next day after school, Ryuko and Mako met Nonon at Ryuko's Mustang in the spot where she always parked. Mako, who was very giddy on top of her usual peppiness, quickly embraced Ryuko's pink-haired friend in an amiable hug. Nonon stared at Ryuko over the girl's shoulder, and Ryuko just waved a dismissive hand at her subtle attitude. The three of them then put their backpacks in the trunk, and then Nonon spoke, "I'll sit in the back. Mako, you can have shotgun."

"Are you sure?" Mako asked, surprised.

"Of course!" She smiled receptively. Ryuko shrugged, and then they all got into their respective seats. This time, Ryuko remembered to buckle her seatbelt, lest she were to receive Mako's cautioning eyes.

They hadn't even pulled out of the parking lot before Nonon cleared her throat, "Ahem. The auxiliary cord, Ryuko?"

The dark-haired girl rolled her eyes. "Right." She plugged one end of a thin black cord into her car's stereo and then handed the other end to Nonon, who then plugged it into the headphone jack in her iPhone.

"Ooh, are you gonna play some music?" Mako asked, turning around in her seat.

"You betcha." There were only a few more seconds of silence before the song she specially selected started resonating throughout the car's adequate sound system.

"Who is this?" Mako asked as the song began progressing through the first verse.

"Twenty One Pilots," Nonon answered with a grin. "Ode to Sleep. Turn it up, Ryuko!"

Ryuko gladly did so, smiling as well as she kept her eyes on the road responsibly. The two of them had bonded over discovering this group together, and this was one of her favorite songs by the band. Soon enough, Nonon started singing along to it, and just as quickly Ryuko joined in at the chorus as well. While Mako didn't know the lyrics, she was plenty amused just hearing the two of them harmonize surprisingly well (she guessed it was their band geek musicality). Ryuko was really belting out the lyrics, and the brunette couldn't keep her eyes off of her as the girl managed to smile and sing at the same time.

It took them the length of that song and three others before they reached the mall. Ryuko tried to find an empty slot in the parking lot closest to the building, and she did a fairly decent job doing so.

When they walked through the doors, Mako looked like a child in a candy shop –actually, that wasn't too far off. She stared at all the shops around her in absolute awe, evident she had no idea where to start. One would think she'd never have actually been to a mall before.

In fact, this prompted Ryuko to ask, "Do you ever come here, Mako?"

"I've been here once or twice," She said. "I never really have a whole lot of spending money like I said, so there's never a good reason to come here."

Ryuko then momentarily considered offering Mako a job at where she worked, but then she remembered the girl also didn't drive, and it'd simply be impractical for her to also pick her up and drop her off for each of her individual shifts. Still, she wished there was some way she could help her. For now, however, she could go through with her secret plan to spend some of her own money on the girl during the outing.

"So, which store do you guys wanna go to first?" Nonon asked.

"Ooh, we should try on some cute outfits!" Mako suggested.

Nonon shrugged at the idea, but Ryuko was more leaning on the side of not wanting to do that (why try on stuff if you're not going to buy it?). But when she saw the excitement and enthusiasm in Mako's eyes, there was no way she could say no. Besides, if she was a good sport about it, maybe it could turn out to be fun. "Alright," She said, smiling at her.

The brunette's eyes lit up, and then she started marching her way through the mall until she found a clothing store that she liked. Once she did, she dragged the other two girls inside and immediately started raiding the racks for cute outfits.

Mako seemed to know what she was doing, but Ryuko was totally at a loss. She watched Nonon curiously survey the store, while she herself just kind of stood in the midst of it all. This wasn't to say that she didn't have a sense of style; she simply had her own rather unique style. She liked to think of it as something like relaxed grunge.

Which is why when Mako approached her with a strapless dress and a wide smile on her face, she was at a loss.

"Try this on, Ryuko!" She held it out to her. "It'll look great on you!"

"Huh? I don't know…" She backed up a little, trying to think of what to say. "What if it's the wrong size?"

Mako looked at her determinedly, and then held the dress up to her as if to see if it would even look like it would fit, Ryuko freezing where she stood as she did so. It did appear to be the appropriate size, she decided in the next moment with a short nod. "Please? Red is such a nice color on you!"

That was true, Ryuko agreed. When she took another look at the dress, she had to admit it was a very nice shade of red. Not quite matching the vibrancy of her hair, it was just a bit more rich and deep. Still, she was apprehensive. She didn't even own a dress, so she wasn't used to putting them on. Then, Nonon approached the two.

"Nonon! Tell Ryuko she has *got* to try this dress on!"

The pink-haired girl evaluated the dress in question. "Looks like the cheerleader's got some pretty good taste, Ryuko," She admitted. "You should *definitely* put that on."

Ryuko looked at her with wide eyes, speechless for a minute. "Okay, b-but, you guys have to try on something, too."

Nonon was visibly amused at her willingness, and Mako was downright elated. Then, the shorter girl looked to Mako expectantly. When she appeared to be confused, Nonon clarified, "Why don't you go pick something for yourself as well? And you might as well pick out something for me too, so it'll be fair to Ryuko here."

"Okay!" She nodded briskly, eager for her new mission. "Wait, what size are you?"

The very short girl sighed. "The smallest they've got."

Mako blinked. "Alright!" And she was on her way.

Ryuko then brought her attention to Nonon, who was smirking knowingly. "What's so funny?" She said accusatorily.

"You wouldn't put that thing on in a million years if it wasn't Mako asking you to."

She averted her eyes. "Your point?"

"You know my point," She said, entertained. "It's alright, though, that dress really *is* nice, so you have nothing to be embarrassed about."

Ryuko didn't respond to this, because soon enough Mako was coming back their way, two more outfits in hand. "I chose dresses for all of us so that no one would be singled out." She smiled, and then handed them their respective dresses. Nonon held hers up to get a good look, and was pleasantly surprised.

They then made their way to the changing room located in the back of the store. Mako was the quickest to get changed and ready to present herself, and Nonon was second. Ryuko took about two minutes longer than her in order to make sure she was actually presentable. She had to admit, the dress did fit perfectly and she actually looked pretty eye-catching in it, she thought just to herself. Still, she was nervous.

"C'mon, Ryuko, you're taking forever!" Mako whined outside her stall.

"Alright, alright." She then slowly unlocked the door to the stall, and tentatively pushed it open. The brunette was standing right there, staring intensely, Nonon standing nearby behind her.

"Whoa…" Was all Mako said, her mouth slightly agape.

"Whoa is right!" Nonon commented. "You really fill that out well, Ryuko. Damn." The brunette nodded rapidly in agreement of her observations.

Ryuko couldn't help but feel her cheeks begin to heat up at their appreciative eyes and kind comments. The dress itself was really rather simple: a cherry red color, subtle sweetheart neckline, mid-thigh length and was slightly layered. It really accentuated her collarbone as well as her waist. It was the simplicity of it that brought out her best features, namely her dark hair that lay delicately around her exposed shoulders. Even with her tousled hair and bare feet, she looked like the epitome of loveliness. "It was a good choice on your part, Mako," She commended.

However, she quickly became distracted by what Mako had chosen to put on. It was a plain, billowy, white knee-length dress. It had a babydoll style waistline and somewhat puffy, short sleeves. It was exactly the sort of thing she would expect Mako to wear, and she looked absolutely adorable in it. “You look…really nice in your dress, too.” Ryuko commented quietly.

“Thank you,” Mako responded, curtseying cutely. For a second, all they could do was stare at each other.

Then, Nonon slid over in her socks next to them. “I agree,” She spoke. “Mako has surprisingly good taste.” She gestured to the dress she had on, which was a rather short, also strapless white dress with a large black ribbon and bow tied around the waist. From the bottom hem up, it had gradient black dots.

Mako smiled and her kindness. “I choose the black and white color scheme for you so no color could clash with your vibrant hair,” She explained.

Nonon pointed a finger. “Smart.”

“So…” Ryuko spoke up. “Can I take this off now?”

“No, no, we gotta take pictures first! Here,” The brunette said, taking out her phone. She went to the applications and then selected the camera option. “I’ll take one of you and Nonon first.”

“Oh, alright,” Ryuko said as a smiling Nonon stood next to her.

“We should do a cool pose,” The shorter girl suggested.

“What kind of pose could we do that wouldn’t be extremely lame?”

“Aw, come on, don’t be a party pooper. Sometimes you gotta be lame in order to not be lame. You understand?” She explained, and Mako nodded from behind her phone.

She didn’t, but she went along with it anyway. “Ooh, let’s do that partners-in-crime thing, you know, where we stand back-to-back and make our hands into pistols.”

“Okay,” Ryuko agreed, somewhat awkwardly getting into position. She figured she might as well go all out with it since she already did this much, and she even went as far as to make a bad-ass expression for the picture.

Once the picture was taken, they both looked to Mako’s phone to see how it came out. “Wow, Ryuko, you really got into it,” Mako giggled.

“Yeah, we look pretty damn tough in our pretty dresses, don’t we?” Nonon laughed. Ryuko grinned, actually really enjoying the picture.

“Me and Nonon next!” Mako declared, and before Ryuko knew it, her phone was in her hand.

“Oh, right,” She said, and then waited for a moment for them to come up with a pose. “Ready?”

“Mhm!” Mako affirmed, and then she pressed the little button on the screen. They immediately returned to her to see it, and it was admittedly cute. They had their hands on each other’s waists and were both holding up peace signs, big smiles adorning their faces.

“Alright, alright, your guy’s turn,” Nonon said, taking the phone from her. Mako dragged Ryuko by her wrist into position, and then draped the taller girl’s arm around her shoulder, and wrapped her own arm around her waist. She leaned her head against her shoulder lightly and then confirmed, “Ready!”

While she was momentarily off-put, Ryuko made sure to smile for the picture (albeit shyly). Nonon snickered softly, and then took the picture.

“Did you get it?” Mako made sure.

“Yep. Very nice,” The pink-haired girl acknowledged, handing the girl’s phone back to her.

“Ooh, Ryuko, look how cute we are!” The brunette said, putting the phone in her face. Ryuko took a look at the picture, and she couldn’t deny it. The girl was noticeably shorter than her and had her head tilted so slightly onto her shoulder, a big smile lighting up her face. She could still feel where her light brown hair had danced on her skin, and where her small hand had gripped just above her hip. She wondered how she could get the picture in her possession, and mentally decided to ask her to text it to her later.

“Let’s take one last one of the three of us in the mirror before we change back,” She suggested, and then the three girls gathered by the large nearby mirror. They decided to put Ryuko in the middle, just because she was the tallest. She held the phone in one hand and made a peace sign with the other, as did the other two girls.

The rest of the mall trip was a lot of enjoyment and giggles. Ryuko couldn’t remember the last time she had so much fun in one simple outing. They ended up trying on just a couple more outfits, some picked out by themselves, some picked out by each other. They also visited a few accessory stores, and Ryuko surprised Mako by buying her a cute necklace the girl had fallen in love with. She was extremely grateful and insisted on paying her back eventually, but Ryuko insisted she didn’t have to. They even stopped for pretzels, which Nonon paid for willingly and Mako ate quicker than anyone else.

On their way home, Ryuko dropped Nonon off first because her house was closest from the mall. Then, it was just her and Mako alone in the car, silent without the music Nonon took with her. Ryuko could go through the trouble of plugging in her own phone and choosing something, but she didn’t really see a point.

Besides, Mako then spoke up, “Nonon’s really fun to hang out with!” She paused. “I was scared she wasn’t gonna like being around me very much.”

“Why do you say that?” She asked, concerned.

“Because she always seemed kinda annoyed by me before,” She explained. “I’m glad we did this. I think I changed her mind.”

Ryuko was quiet for a little bit. “I don’t think she was ever really annoyed by you, you know. I think she’s friendlier to you now, now that you and I are-” She coughed. “-better friends.”

“That makes sense,” Mako acknowledged quietly, but still didn’t seem to quite accept her words.

Impulsively, Ryuko took a hand off of the steering wheel and placed it reassuringly on the girl’s knee. While she didn’t take her eyes off the road, she did speak again. “Mako, I’m serious. Not everyone finds you annoying. I think people just get surprised at your energy, is all.”

She then coughed nervously again and removed her hand from her knee. She glanced quickly over at the girl, just to see her cheeks colored a bit. She smiled and continued, “I think you know that. I think you like being reassured. Which is totally fine,” She clarified.

“Maybe,” Mako admitted very quietly.

Ryuko pulled the car up against the curb next to Mako’s house. “You can just tell me whenever you need that sort of reassurance, alright? You don’t have to dance around the issue. I’ll always be happy to do that for you.”

“Thanks, Ryuko.” She smiled receptively, and then pushed the car door open very slowly.

“It’s not a problem, really.” She smiled right back. “See you tomorrow?”

“Mhm!” Mako affirmed.

Chapter 10: Cheetos

Chapter Notes

> Just a reminder that this is the second chapter I've posted in one day! Don't want anyone confused.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day in anatomy, Mako walks over to their table and the first thing Ryuko notices about her is that she was wearing the necklace that she bought her. She also had on a swoop-neck tee, so the tiny little silver bunny pendant was entirely visible against her collarbone. She couldn't help but smile at this.

Mako notices her smile and she beams back at her without even greeting her verbally, and Ryuko feels her heart beat in her chest. She felt momentarily overwhelmed simply by her presence and was tempted to put her head down to hide her face, but she quickly gathered her composure. She reminded herself that this level of homosexuality was the kind that inhibited her academic performance, and that class was starting.

As the lecture began, Ryuko kept making quick glances over to Mako to find her toying with her necklace absentmindedly. She couldn't get the word 'cute' out of her mind, until that word was quickly replaced with a different one from the teacher's mouth –"test".

She sat up a bit and start listening to him again, and thankfully he repeated himself, "So, just as a reminder we have a test over chapter two on Friday. You'll have the entire hour to complete it, and you'll receive your study guides tomorrow."

Suddenly, all the day dreaming and skipping class caught up with her. Her notes were incomplete as well as her assignments, and she never even bothered to copy them from Mako or anyone else, for that matter. She couldn't even tell you what exactly chapter two was covering.

"Psst, Mako," Ryuko said in a hushed tone.

"Hm?" She turned to face her.

"Do you have your notes completed and, uh, your assignments done?" The desperation in her eyes was clear.

The brunette blinked. "Oh, that's right! You must be behind because of the days you were skipping." Mako's acknowledgement of it made her feel a little bad. She continued, "But yeah, I have most of it! Did you want to copy them?"

"That would be awesome," Ryuko said, incredibly grateful.

Just as Mako was about to scoot her notebook over for her to copy, the teacher turned on the projector, a whole new set of notes displayed for the class to copy. Ryuko deadpanned, and Mako spoke up again in a quiet voice, “Oops, looks like you’ll have to get them from me later!”

The dark-haired girl sighed and began copying the new notes into her notebook. It was beyond her why he was teaching new things, what with the test two days away. Then, a new thought occurred to her, and she vocalized it before she even processed it.

“Hey, Mako.” The girl looked toward her again, “Do you wanna get together and study tomorrow or something?”

Mako’s eyes lit up. “Sure! Right after school?”

“Yeah. We could even go to my house instead, if you’d like.”

“That sounds neat! I’ve never been in *your* house before,” She pointed out like Ryuko wasn’t already aware. “I bet your room’s really cool!”

Ryuko’s eyes went wide as she remembered her room, the room with various posters hung askew and clothing spread out all over the floor, her unmade bed… “Yeah, it’s pretty cool,” She said, making a mental note to take the time to clean it up that evening.

“Well, I look forward to it!” She said. “I can even teach you the material, instead of you just copying it from me.”

“And you said you weren’t smart.”

“I told you, I pay attention in anatomy!” She defended. “It has to do with my future career, after all.”

“Right, right,” She responded, putting her hands up in resignation.

That evening, right when she got home, Ryuko immediately began cleaning her room. Admittedly, she hadn’t done so in quite a while so she wasn’t really sure where to begin. She figured she would start with determining which of the clothes on the floor were actually clean, and which weren’t. Thankfully, most of them were, so she simply folded them and put them away.

Once she got done adjusting her posters and vacuuming her floor, she took a good look at the room. It really was pretty cool, once it wasn’t totally messy. She’d save making her bed for tomorrow since she was going to sleep in it again anyway. Honestly, she wasn’t sure how well she would sleep, because with every passing moment she was more and more excited for Mako to come over.

After another twenty-four hour’s time, Ryuko finally had the pleasure of driving Mako to her house. As she pulled up to the aforementioned home, the brunette practically had her face pressed up to the window’s glass, in awe of the house for whatever reason.

“This is your house?” She asked in disbelief.

“Yep,” She answered.

“It’s really big!”

“Ah, not really…” She said, pulling her car into the garage.

“Yeah-huh! Bigger than mine, at least.”

Ryuko rolled her eyes playfully. “C’mon, let’s go inside.”

Mako cautiously followed Ryuko into her house, stalking behind her as though they were investigating a haunted castle and not the house Ryuko lived in. Soon enough, however, she began surveying each and every one of her surroundings curiously. She followed Ryuko into the kitchen, where she opened the fridge and snatched a couple of water bottles.

“Is your dad home?” The brunette asked.

“He should be,” She said. “But he usually doesn’t come out of his room, so. Come on, my room’s in the basement.”

“The basement?” She sounded fearful.

“It’s a finished basement, so it’s not like there are spiders everywhere or something. In fact, I think I’ve ever only seen one spider in my room before,” She thought aloud. At this, Mako appeared more frightened. “Don’t worry, I killed it!” She assured.

“Okay,” Mako said, nodding slowly. As Ryuko began to lead the way, she went right back to her cautious, investigatory mode. However, when they got down into her room, she lit up. She did more than that, actually: she promptly dropped her backpack launched herself onto Ryuko’s bed, face-first.

“You like my room, then?” She asked, amused.

“It’s even cooler than I thought!” She said, her voice muffled. Almost inaudibly, she spoke into the mattress, “And it smells like you.” Then, she sat up abruptly and left no room for response, “Your bed is way bigger than mine, too! If I had a bed this nice, my stuffed animals would be way more comfy…” She said, stroking the comforter.

Comments like that from Mako made Ryuko feel suddenly more grateful for what she had, but in a very odd way. “So, should we get started on the anatomy, or…?” She said, placing the water bottles on her nightstand. Mako looked up at her almost as fearfully as she had when she mentioned the spider. “Snacks first?”

“Snacks!” She agreed, clapping her hands together.

“What would you like?”

“What do you have?” She tilted her head inquisitively.

“Uh, chips, mostly,” She recalled. “Do you like Cheetos?”

“Are you asking me if I like Cheetos, a notoriously cheese-flavored snack?” She raised her brows.

“Should’ve guessed,” She said. “I’ll go get a bowl. Why don’t you go ahead and get your anatomy stuff out? We don’t have to look at it just yet, but we should get started soon.”

Mako squinted, but she knew she was right. “Alrighty.”

Ryuko quickly went up the stairs, found a decent sized plastic bowl, and poured about half a bag of Cheetos into it then went right on back down the stairs. When she got back into her room, Mako had already gotten out her anatomy notebook and assignment folder and was sitting patiently atop her bed again. Thankfully, there was enough room on her queen-sized bed to work on there.

She handed the bowl off to the girl, whose eyes had widened considerably at the sight of cheesy snack. The second Ryuko turned around again, she heard crunching. She made her way to her backpack and then also removed her anatomy materials from it. Then, she climbed atop her bed as well and sat across from the brunette.

“I don’t really know where to begin with this stuff…” Ryuko admitted, looking down at her notes in confusion. Then, she looked up to Mako for guidance, just to see her fingers hovering possessively over the bowl, the tips of which were already gathering the infamous Cheeto dust…which was also somehow smudged at the corner of her mouth as well. Ryuko wasn’t sure how that was even possible.

Before she even thought it through, she licked the pad of her thumb and brought it to Mako’s face, efficiently wiping away the residue. The brunette looked visibly surprised, and froze in response.

“I, uh,” Ryuko stuttered in her defense. “You had a little something there…”

Mako blinked at her, and then smiled at her. “I am the messiest eater, I swear! Thanks.” She then set the bowl aside, licked the cheese excess off her own fingertips, and then picked up her own notes. “Anyway, this chapter is covering the circulatory system, like the heart and stuff. Which is why we did the whole pulse and blood pressure thing.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“So, which assignments haven’t you finished?” She asked.

“Most of them,” She answered honestly.

Mako chewed on the inside of her cheek. “How about this,” She began. “You can copy my notes and assignments and if you have questions, you can ask me. If you pay attention to what you’re copying in the notes, though, it should make it easier. Sound good?”

“Yeah, but…” Ryuko sounded conflicted. “What’re you gonna do in the meantime?”

“Right now? I’m gonna go pee. Where’s your bathroom?”

The dark-haired girl let out a small chuckle. “Upstairs, past the kitchen, first door on the left. Sorry, we don’t have one down here.”

“No problem!” Mako said, scrambling off the bed and then zooming up the stairs.

Ryuko shook her head, and then grabbed the brunette’s notebook from where she had been sitting. She had her notes open to the beginning of the chapter, so she had to flip through a couple pages to figure out where exactly she had left off. Thankfully, Mako’s handwriting was very neat (and very fitting of her personality), and her note-taking style was remarkably organized. She found it hard to believe that anatomy was the only class she did well in.

As she was flipping through the pages, she noticed some scribbling in the margins. She assumed the words pertained to the subject matter, that they were things she had to write in as an afterthought…that was until she took a closer look at them. Many of them were tiny drawings, bunnies and such, but one caught her eye in particular. It read, “Mako Matoi” with a little heart next to it. In fact, this particular phrase (name?) was written a few times throughout the margins.

Ryuko blushed a deep shade of red, and then impulsively slammed shut the notebook like she had seen something she shouldn’t have. She really didn’t have ample time to process this, because Mako was inside her household. She didn’t even have time to react!

She really wasn’t sure what to do. Did Mako forget she had that written in there? Did she mean for her to see that? Was it all some elaborate joke? Her mind was racing, and before she heard footsteps begin to descend the steps, she forced herself to tell her brain that she was over thinking it.

Still, when Mako sat back on her bed, Ryuko couldn’t bring herself to open the notebook again. However, she knew she couldn’t just sit there doing nothing, so she sucked it up, cracked it open, and flipped it open to a page she was pretty sure didn’t have the name written on it. She decided that if she needed to copy from a page that did have it in the margins, she would just have to pretend she didn’t see it.

Just when she thought she had regained her cool, Mako asked, “Are you alright, Ryuko? You’re sweating a little.”

“Oh, uh, yeah!” She responded. “It’s a tad hot down here, don’t you think?”

“It’s pretty comfortable, actually,” She answered honestly. “Warmer upstairs.”

“Must just be me, then,” She muttered, trying again in vain to focus on anatomy. Eventually, however, she was able to locate where she left off in taking notes, and it wasn’t on a page that Mako had doodled her feelings on.

Her *feelings*…oh god. Ryuko tried ignored her own brain for the sake of concentration.

With lightning speed and rather crappy handwriting, she managed to copy down all the notes she missed while skipping. Everything really had to come back around and bite her in the ass,

didn't it? Thankfully, Mako seemed blissfully unaware of her internal dilemma. She was just grateful to be done with the notebook, as she handed it back to the girl.

"Hey, could we turn on the TV or something?" Mako asked out of the blue.

"Oh! Uh, sure." She suddenly remembered that she had a television, and wondering why she didn't think to turn it on sooner. "Here you go," She said, giving the girl the remote. "Can I see your assignments now?"

"Mhm." She handed over her assignment folder.

Ryuko then began calmly filling in answers she didn't have, or changing answers she hadn't been sure about. She kept her own notes out for referencing like Mako had suggested, and it only sort of helped because there were some spots where even her own handwriting was illegible to her. It was okay, though, because she surprisingly already knew a lot of the answers the homework was asking.

As Mako finally found something to watch in order to entertain herself, Ryuko noticed her own heart still beating perceptibly. Obviously, the phrase the girl had scribbled in her notebook was undeniably derivative of romantic feeling. Unless she was just being *that* quirky, but still, that was pretty far-fetched. Did Mako daydream in class as much as she did? When she did so, was she thinking about her? Ryuko felt like the brunette did more actual dreaming than daydreaming.

When she was sure she wasn't paying attention to her, Ryuko stole some glances at Mako. She was lying up against her pillows, one of her legs tucked under the other, her expression relatively blank as she watched the television. She was wearing rather short denim shorts and a teal v-neck, the bunny necklace ever-present around her neck. Her short chestnut hair reached her jaw line and framed her round face perfectly. There was an urge deep in Ryuko to move from her current spot, to crawl over to the girl, and to just *kiss*-

She shook her head as if to physically remove the thought from her mind. No time to be thinking about that right now. Her subconscious asked, '*When was the time to be thinking about it?*', and she did not answer herself.

Eventually, she finished copying the assignments and handed the folder back off to Mako. Then, she checked the clock –it was only five.

"When did you need to be home?" Ryuko asked.

"My mom wanted me to be home for dinner, so my dad's gonna pick me up when he gets off work in about half an hour, that way you don't have to worry about taking me home," She explained.

"It's no trouble, but if you already have that arranged, that's fine."

"Really, it's not too out of the way. But thanks." She smiled.

Ryuko was not only at a loss for words, but also a loss for actions. What was she to do with Mako for the remaining thirty minutes? Well, first thing she could do was put away her anatomy stuff, as the brunette followed her lead. Then, there was much more space on the bed. The dark-haired girl shrugged, and then decided to join Mako in whatever she was watching.

“Could you scoot over just a bit?” Ryuko asked kindly, seeing as the girl was taking up all the headboard space.

“Oh, yeah! Sorry,” She said, moving over and allowing her space.

“What are we watching?” She asked after she got comfortable.

“This show I found about people dealing with different types of anxiety disorders,” She informed. “It really opens your eyes to the kind of stuff anybody could be dealing with at any given time, without anyone else even knowing.”

Ryuko looked over to her, a little taken aback by her sudden profoundness. She would do that, occasionally; be downright silly in non-silly situations, and then do a one-eighty and say something that really made her think. Not that it was quite that abrupt, it was just…the depth of the things she said sometimes would always surprise her a little, she thought.

“Mako,” Ryuko spoke, getting her attention. “Are you okay? You seem distracted.”

“Huh? What do you mean? Of course I am!” She smiled.

For some time, Ryuko had subtly feared that Mako’s overwhelming peppiness was a slight cover-up for sadness she might be experiencing. She would never chalk all of her personality up to that, but just the way that the girl wanted other people to be happy, the way that she was always trying to cheer them up…she couldn’t help but wonder if it was because she didn’t want people to feel bad, to feel how she might.

“Are you sure?” She asked gently, not prying anything out of her.

“Yeah,” She said quietly. “You know that thing you said about how you were teased in elementary school and middle school in stuff? Well, so was I…it wasn’t just the cheerleaders here in high school. I’ve mostly gotten over that stuff, but it still kinda hurts sometimes. Pretty badly, if I think about it long enough,” She explained calmly.

“I’ve just been wondering, Ryuko, ever since you told me that…since you’ve told me you were teased, too? I’ve been wondering if you feel that sometimes. And then I get to thinking that, if you do, I’d want to help. Well, more that I feel the impulse to help, even if I wouldn’t know how to, exactly. I suppose that’s what they call empathy? I don’t know…” She trailed off a bit. “I just…I think about that a lot.” She swallowed. “I think about you a lot.”

“Mako…” Ryuko spoke softly, still trying to process everything she had just said. It wasn’t the first time she had opened up so willingly, so she was relatively used to dealing with it by now. But this time, her voice…the sincerity in it was somewhere between sad and sweet, and Ryuko felt incredibly touched as she attempted to compose her thoughts.

“I don’t talk about this much, you know, because I don’t really like to be vulnerable, but… yeah, I know where you’re coming from. I’ve grown since I was mocked, I’m tougher than that now, but sometimes I get to thinking…why? Like, why did they have to tease me?” She choked a little bit. “My dad always told me that’s just how kids are. But they never teased the other kids like they teased me. Sometimes I just wonder *why*, and that’s when it starts to hurt a bit.”

Mako had kept her eyes on her the whole explanation, her eyebrows drawn together in concern. “That’s exactly how it feels,” She stated quietly. “That’s exactly what it is.”

Ryuko sniffed. “Yeah.”

Before she knew it, Mako’s arms were wrapped around her in a tight embrace, her head under her chin and her face buried in her chest. She stayed like that for a moment, unflinching, letting her care and compassion become evident in ways words couldn’t compensate for. Ryuko was still for a second before she returned the hug with one arm.

Suddenly, there was a light buzzing, and it only took another second for Ryuko to realize it was Mako’s cell phone. Still, the girl held fast and didn’t move.

“You’re gonna miss your call,” The dark-haired girl whispered.

“Yeah,” Mako responded, nuzzling her.

After another good thirty seconds, the brunette finally broke away from her. She sat up, patted down her hair, and pulled her phone from her pocket and checked it. “My dad’s here,” She announced.

“I figured.”

“Well, I had fun!” She said, sliding her shoes on. When she looked back at Ryuko to see her face read blank for the most part, she spoke again, “Really, I did. Watching you scramble to catch up in anatomy is a total blast. Your face was slightly panicked the whole time.”

At this, the dark-haired girl reached behind herself, pulled over a pillow, and whacked Mako with it. “Hey, hey! Just teasing. No need to start a pillow fight.” She stood up and grabbed her backpack, slinging it over her shoulder. “We could do that some other time.”

Ryuko’s expression changed to one of determination. “You’re on.”

Chapter End Notes

Ryuko romantically wipes away the Cheeto dust from Mako's lip. :'-) otp material.

Anyway, the confession chapter is up next!!

Chapter 11: Inevitable

Chapter Notes

> [Snare drum roll] The moment you've been waiting for [Snare drum tap] The confession! Enjoy!!
> Also a very good song to listen to while reading this is 400 Lux by Lorde. I listened to it while writing it :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That Friday, Ryuko ended up doing better than she thought she would on the anatomy test. Or at least, she thought she did; none of the questions or concepts on it looked too unfamiliar.

She hadn't thought about it much throughout the week, but they had another football game that night, and it seemed like it had been forever since they last had one…even though the last one was only two weeks prior. Still, so much had happened since then. This being considered, she was really excited for this game –the band had put on another decent chunk of drill in preparation for halftime.

So when she got herself situated in the bleachers, she was delighted to see Mako again on the track in her cheerleader getup. However, the delighted feeling dissipated a bit when she remembered what the brunette had said about the other girls. She really hoped they wouldn't give her any trouble, and that they hadn't already. When Mako saw Ryuko, though, she waved a joyous pom-pom at her. Ryuko smiled real big back at her.

The game started and progressed as usual, the home team taking the lead as the sun began to disappear behind the hills. Ryuko alternated between having casual conversation with Nonon and a few other percussionists she tolerated, and watching Mako do her routine.

It was just a couple minutes before the end of the second quarter, right before the band had to line up on the track that she got to see Mako top the pyramid (something she hadn't seen before). She looked a tiny bit shaky at first, but then she straightened out and beamed at the crowd, perched on one leg. She caught sight of Ryuko again from so high up, and even waved to her again.

Then, Ryuko's world slowed down as she watched Mako very suddenly lose her balance. She began falling backward, waving her arms rapidly as if to slow her descent. Ryuko would never be able to get that expression of pure panic out of her head.

The band was standing up to make their way to the track, but Ryuko didn't watch where she was going as she kept her eyes on Mako, terror filling her own heart. The other girls caught her a second before she could've hit the ground, and Ryuko didn't realize she had been

holding her breath. She wanted nothing more to go over to her and make sure she was okay; she was sitting on the ground, the other cheerleaders surrounding her.

She couldn't do anything about it at the moment, however, because halftime was beginning. She tried to concentrate on her tapping, but she was having a great deal of trouble. The only way she was able to perform with her usual level of decency was by telling herself over and over again that Mako was okay, that it was going to be okay. Still, she ended up getting off step a few times and also glancing over to the cheerleaders instead of the drum major. Nonon even caught her doing this and gave her a scolding expression.

However, the second the performance was over and she had tapped the entire band off the field, she then quickly set her snare and helmet down next to the bleachers and rushed to the cheerleaders. Some of the band members noticed this, but didn't say anything.

Ryuko found Mako sitting up against the stand's wall by herself, her knees drawn to her chest and her head buried in her arms. She decided not to say anything yet, and simply sit down next to the girl. The brunette noticed the presence next to her, and she peeked over at her with one eye. "Ryuko?"

"Hey," She spoke kindly. Mako hid her face again, and didn't make a sound again, save for a few sniffles. It was then that she noticed she had received a pretty bad scrape from the fall. Then, Ryuko had an idea.

She stood up, and Mako noticed the shifting of her person and peeked up at her again. She saw her standing there, looking at her sympathetically, and offering a hand to help her up.

Mako accepted the hand and took it, rising from the track. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and sniffled again, and she noticed that Ryuko hadn't let go of her hand. She looked up at her, bewildered. "Come with me," The taller teen spoke.

Before Mako had a chance to object, Ryuko was already leading her off the track and out of the stadium through one of the gates near the bleachers. "Wait, won't you get in trouble?" The brunette voiced in concern.

"Maybe," Ryuko responded without a care in the world.

"Where are we going?" Mako asked as they entered the parking lot.

"Nowhere, really." She kept up her brisk pace, gripping the girl's hand lightly. "Ah," She spoke as she found her car where she had parked it.

She stepped in front of the Mustang and let go of Mako's hand, and then scooted up onto the hood, sitting atop it. Mako looked confused for a moment, so Ryuko patted the hood next to her, inviting her to sit with her. The smaller teen didn't question it did so.

Ryuko breathed in and out very slowly and then spoke, "Do you want to talk about what just happened to you?"

“Not really,” Mako said honestly. “But it might do me some good.” She sniffled again. “It’s just…we had been rehearsing that for so long, using me specifically…it was really humiliating to mess it up, you know? I’m supposed to be good at this…”

“You *are* good at cheerleading,” She reminded her. “It was just a fluke.”

“Yeah, but, I shouldn’t be able to get distracted that easily! I saw you in the bleachers smiling at me and I just…my leg suddenly just gave out on me…that’s not supposed to happen. The other cheerleaders got real mad at me, and the instructor told me to sit out for the rest of the game, a-and I just…” She sounded like she was about to cry again.

Ryuko’s eyes widened at the fact that she was the one who caused that to occur…even if it was indirectly. “Mako…I was so worried. I was so distracted during our performance worrying about you…I thought you might’ve been seriously injured.” She paused. “I’m incredibly relieved you’re not, and I’m kinda thankful your instructor gave you the rest of the game off. I thought I was getting you in trouble by bringing you out here.” She chuckled lightly.

Mako didn’t comment on that last part, rather she was focused on something she said earlier. “I caused you to mess up your performance?” She asked, the sadness even more evident in her voice.

“No, no, not badly enough for it to matter! I got off-step once or twice, but I don’t think anyone noticed. Really, it’s not your fault,” She corrected hurriedly.

“Oh.” She sniffed. “Good.”

For the next few moments, the two just stared out into the night sky. They focused on the bright stars that decorated the dark sky above the treetops that surrounded the pavement. The only other light emanating over the lot, besides the pureness of the Moon’s light, was the artificiality of the stadium’s lights in the near distance. The nighttime air was fresh and intoxicating.

“Ryuko,” Mako spoke cautiously, as if in fear of destroying the peace.

“Hm?” She looked toward the girl, just to find her staring right back at her.

“Thanks,” She said quietly.

It was impossible for her not to notice the way Mako’s big amber eyes reflected the moonlight, the way they sparkled with her sincerity, the way it cast a pale glow on her complexion and made her chestnut hair shine. “For what?”

“For…” The brunette exhaled. “…everything.” She said in a tiny voice, and it was then Ryuko noticed her eyes dart to her lips, and then back to her own.

Mako had gotten closer to her very subtly, and Ryuko was still lost in her eyes and the earnestness she saw in them. She, too, glanced at the girl’s lips before she felt the air begin to

draw thinner between them. They held their breath as their eyelids began to close, their now half-lidded eyes focused exclusively on each other's lips.

Finally, their eyes closed all the way. Then, their slightly-parted lips brushed ever so gently against one another's, and the world around them stood still. Ryuko established the contact a little more definitely, taking Mako's bottom lip between her own with feather-light pressure. Then, they held the kiss, the only sounds around them being that of the crickets and the distant cheering in the stadium.

She could've stayed just like that forever, and she genuinely wanted to. Mako's lips were dreamily soft, softer than her hands had been, softer than anything she could remember. The delicacy of the act caused her heart to beat in her ears, and suddenly her hands itched to be anywhere else besides atop the hood of the car. She brought one of her hands to cup the girl's cheek with care, and Mako let out a very small whimper in response. She then brushed her fingers back to weave through her shiny hair.

Gradually, they broke away from each other in favor of taking a breath. Their faces were an inch apart, Ryuko's hand still intertwined in her hair gently, and Mako spoke, "I like you."

Ryuko stared directly into her eyes and breathed, "Really?" in a sarcastic tone.

The corners of Mako's mouth spread into a wide grin. "Yeah," She spoke again. "Yeah, I really, really do."

Ryuko, too, smiled. "I like you, too."

Then, she kissed her again, both hands off the hood.

A good number of minutes later, the two girls decided to return to the stadium. Ryuko walked Mako back over to the cheerleaders, and just when she said goodbye to her turned around to make her way back into the bleachers, she heard one of the girls make a comment –"Oh hey look, the slacker's back."

"Psh, finally," Another one commented.

"Coach said I get the rest of the game off…" Mako defended lamely.

"Suppose that the kind of treatment a slacker deserves," The first girl continued. "Not surprising."

Ryuko clenched her fists, feeling that notorious sense of rage begin to course through her again for the first time in a long while. She stopped in her tracks, and then turned around very abruptly.

"Why don't you girls just lay off Mako, huh?" She said, trying to control her tone.

Mako looked at her, astonished, and the second girl who commented countered, "Yeah? What's a band geek gonna do to stop us?"

“You want to know what I can do to stop you?” She seethed, practically growling her words, getting up in her face.

The girl swallowed. “I’m not scared of you.”

“No?” Ryuko asked threateningly, showing her teeth. The cheerleader could only see pure, concentrated fury in her steel blue eyes as she continued, “You should be.”

The girl back up slightly, trying but failing to appear unaffected. Then, the first girl spoke up in an exasperated tone, “Fine, we’ll stop.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Her words rolled out. She might’ve stayed around a bit longer, but something told her she was already in enough trouble for missing the entire third quarter away from the band.

Chapter End Notes

If it wasn't obvious, it isn't over yet. About 3 chapters left!

Chapter 12: Human Beings

That Saturday, Ryuko found herself pacing around her bedroom, unable to get the previous night's events off of her mind…unable to get Mako off of her mind. Ever since she was finally able to kiss the girl, all she wanted was to be able to do it again and again. She eventually resolved to flopping on top of her bed and staring at the ceiling.

What was really at the forefront of her mind was the fact that they hadn't defined the relationship, or what they had with each other. She had been spending her time wondering how she could make that happen. Then, she had an excellent idea –she pulled out her phone and decided to shoot Mako a text.

'*Hey, Mako,* ' She typed, '*you got any plans for today?* '

A few minutes later, '*Nope! I'm free* '

Ryuko smiled. '*I know it's short notice, but…do you wanna come over? I can come get you, if you need* '

A longer increment of time. '*Yeah, my mom said it was fine!! When will you leave?* '

She looked at the clock: it was almost 2 in the afternoon. '*Half an hour?* ' She sent.

'*I'll be ready!* ' The message came quickly, and Ryuko smiled again.

A total of forty-five minutes later, Ryuko was pulling back into her garage, an energetic Mako in the passenger's seat. She turned off the engine, removed the keys, and then turned to her. "I forgot to mention that my dad's out of town for a week on some kind of business trip. He didn't give a whole lot of details, but yeah, he's not here right now," She informed.

"That's fine!" Mako assured.

"Good," Ryuko said, and then opened her door.

Once inside, they both went immediately into the basement. Ryuko's room was still tidy enough from the last time she did a big clean up a few days prior, save for a few articles of clothing here and there. Mako didn't seem to mind; again, she immediately took a seat on the edge of the taller girl's bed.

"So, why'd you ask me over?" She questioned, swinging her legs casually. "Not that we can't just hang out or anything, but it was last minute and all."

"No reason, just thought it'd be fun," Ryuko spoke quickly, and then sat down next to her. "Actually, I'm gonna level with you. I didn't want to bring it up right away, but I guess there's no reason not to. I just really need to figure this out." She took a breath, and then faced her. "Mako, what are we?"

The brunette blinked at her cutely. “Human beings?”

Ryuko couldn’t help but chuckle and avert her gaze, but she also felt her cheeks begin to color at the prospect of having to clarify her question. “I-I mean, like, how would you define the uh, relationship between you and I?”

After a few more seconds of silence, Ryuko looked back of to the girl to see her eyes wide and her mouth drawn together, a light rosy color atop her cheekbones. It was one of the cutest expressions she had seen her make to date, but it also indicated she might’ve put her on the spot. “I’m sorry, you don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to! I didn’t mean to pressure you into making a decision right away.”

“No, you were right to ask! I’ve been thinking about it too, I just…” She twiddled her thumbs in her lap. “I-I just, Ryuko is so *pretty* and nice and strong and supportive and pretty –did I say that already? I didn’t mean to, I was just…you make me so-”

The babbling girl was interrupted as Ryuko’s lips covered hers suddenly. She kept them pressed there for just a moment, just long enough to feel the girl slowly exhale through her nose. Then, she gradually pulled away, and Mako kept her eyes shut as though she had been totally hijacked by the sensation. The older teen smiled at this, and then pecked the tip of her nose as if to break her trance.

Mako slowly opened her eyes to meet Ryuko’s blue ones, and then she spoke, “I’ve been thinking it would be real nice to be Ryuko’s girlfriend.” The dark-haired girl grinned wide, and then the brunette continued, “Also, your kisses make me feel real dizzy.”

“Should I stop doing them, then?” She asked, concerned.

“No, no!” She said emphatically. “It’s a good dizzy, I think.”

“Good, ‘cause I don’t think I could…” She spoke lowly, and then tilted her head and leaned in to steal yet another sweet kiss.

This time when she eventually broke away from her, Mako made a slight hum of disappointment at the loss of contact. “Mako…” Ryuko spoke, tipping the girl’s chin gently in order to meet her eyes. “I would love for you to be my girlfriend.”

The brunette then took on a determined expression. “Okay, but you also have to be mine.”

“I think I can do that,” She teased. Her eyes darted down and she noticed the girl was again wearing the necklace she had bought her. She scooped up the pendant into her palm, unintentionally brushing her sternum with her fingers, in order to get a better look at the little silver bunny. “This really is a cute necklace. I’m glad I bought it for you.” She met her eyes again. “It suits you.”

“Thank you…” Mako said very quietly, hypnotized by her gaze.

“Anyway, now that that’s all cleared up,” She said, scooting back suddenly onto her bed and up against her pillows. “You wanna watch a movie or something?”

“Yeah!” She responded enthusiastically, promptly kicking off her shoes and then crawling over to the other side of the bed to join her. “Wait, is it going to be another scary one?”

“It doesn’t have to be, if you don’t want to,” She said. “Do you know of any movies you like that’re on Netflix?”

“Hmm…” She tapped her index finger to her chin in thought. “Can I see the controller?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” She handed over the device, and then Mako began browsing the service. It was a good couple of minutes of her squinting at the screen and making small noises of indecision before she finally settled on a title. Not that Ryuko minded waiting.

“*The Emperor’s New Groove?*” The dark-haired girl read aloud as she casually reached and arm around Mako and pulled her closer to her. “I guess I’m not surprised.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She said defensively, puffing out her cheeks in her signature fashion. “It’s a classic.”

“Nothing, nothing, you’re right,” Ryuko compromised. Honestly, she didn’t really care what she was watching as long as she was spending time with the girl.

Mako snuggled up against Ryuko as the movie began, her head fitting nicely into the crook of her neck. She was relatively silent during the beginning of the film, and then laughed openly during the humorous parts (Ryuko loved hearing her bubbly giggles) and even seemed to get upset at the more gloomy parts. As the movie approached the plot’s climax, she was biting her nails and had scooted even closer to Ryuko. The older teen was arguably more entertained by the girl’s antics than she was the film.

Near the end of the movie, Ryuko had completely averted her attention toward her new girlfriend. She was wearing short denim shorts (a type of clothing she seemed to own a lot of) and a loose-fitted tee. Without her shoes on, she could see the girl even had her toenails painted a cute peach color. She felt incredibly lucky to have such a pretty girl show this kind of interest in her.

As the credits began rolling across the screen, Mako had stopped paying attention to the television and started paying attention to Ryuko’s touches: the way she cupped her cheek in order to get her to face her, the way she looked into her eyes, and then the way that she kissed her. She pecked her lips once, leaving room for Mako to comment softly, “Your kisses are addicting.”

“Your *lips* are addicting,” She countered.

“Mmm…” The brunette hummed as Ryuko seized her lips again, this time more fervently. The taller girl turned her body a bit toward her more in order to face her better and more comfortably. She worked her mouth against hers slowly, almost cautiously and teeming with affection.

“Ryuko,” Mako mumbled between strokes of kisses. After a few more, she pulled back just enough to put some distance between them and spoke her name again, “Ryuko, I…I meant to

say this earlier, but I wanted to say thanks for…for yesterday, when you defended me against the other cheerleaders…"

"Mako, you don't have to thank me for looking out for your wellbeing." She smiled at her sympathetically. "In case you haven't noticed, I care a great deal for you…you don't deserve any of the crap they give you, and I will always stick up for you." She sat up a bit straighter. "Actually, I'm glad you brought it up. Did they bother you any more after I left?"

"No, they kinda gave up, I guess. I think they grumbled some mean things about you, but I didn't quite catch what they said exactly," She recalled. "Sorry."

"I'd much rather they come after me than you. They don't affect me at all, considering I don't even see them as often as you do." She grabbed the girl's hand in her own. "No snide comments from a bunch of petty girls are ever going to get to me, so don't worry about it, alright?"

Mako searched Ryuko's eyes as she spoke, only to find nothing but honesty and compassion. There were few words to describe the type of affection that was currently washing over the brunette's mind as she heard her speak, as she reassured her protection. She had never felt quite so looked after, so valued. It was a brand new sensation, to be cared for so much by someone other than family. In Ryuko, she found a genuine friend, and now a dedicated lover.

This time, it was Mako who initiated the kiss.

Ryuko was pleasantly surprised, as she took her time closing her own eyelids and savoring the moment. The brunette was moving her lips with significant energy, and the dark-haired girl was getting affected by her enthusiasm. She ran her fingers through her hair as if to bring her even closer, and then Mako did the same to her…and it felt *good*, her fingertips against her scalp.

Then, Ryuko took the next step and prodded her tongue slightly beyond her own lips, running it along Mako's bottom lip cautiously. The smaller girl seized momentarily, unsure if she had done it on purpose. She tentatively brought the tip of her tongue to meet hers gently, and sighed as Ryuko then lightly dragged her tongue across her own.

Soon enough, the only noises in the room was the sound of the music in the credits from the movie, and the girl's lips and tongues meeting again and again, along with some mutual noises of satisfaction. There was an inherent need between them to be even closer to each other physically, but neither of them was sure how to go about it.

Eventually, Ryuko's hand moved from woven through Mako's hair, to momentarily stationary on top of the mattress, and finally to carefully placed upon the smaller girl's knee. She stroked her smooth skin lightly with her thumb, and then traveled her hand ever so gradually up her thigh, not breaking the kiss for a second. She stopped midway up the distance, and then slid her hand more toward her inner thigh.

Mako adjusted slightly in favor of Ryuko's hand, while simultaneously whimpering faintly into her mouth. The taller girl sighed at her encouragement, and slowed the strokes of their

kiss to be more deliberate. She also continued to rub against the soft skin of her thigh with her thumb.

Just as her fingers began audaciously (granted slowly) inching further again, Mako's phone buzzed loudly from her pocket. The brunette whined loudly and then lingeringly disconnected her mouth from Ryuko's. She pulled the phone from her short's pocket and unlocked the screen.

"Oh, crap! I lost track of the time…my dad wanted me to be home before dinner, he's waiting outside right now…" She got up hurriedly and scrambled to put her shoes back on. "I had a great time, really," She said, gathering herself quickly.

"Mako," Ryuko spoke, sitting up on the edge of her bed. The brunette looked over at her, and the older teen beckoned her back over. She approached her, and Ryuko began patting down her hair. "Your hair was messy. Wouldn't want him asking questions." She smiled up at her.

"Oh, right, thanks." She smiled back, her heart beating hard, and then leaned in for one last kiss before she left.

Chapter 13: Inefficient Bowler

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following school week passed without issue. Ryuko and Mako both decided to keep their relationship relatively private; they weren't scared and certainly not ashamed or anything, they just didn't want everyone in their business. Teenagers regularly gossiped about heterosexual relationships –if there was a new homosexual one, they wouldn't shut up about it. Especially considering Mako was a cheerleader…no one would leave them alone.

That being considered, Ryuko let Nonon know immediately. She never told her about the kiss her and Mako had shared on the hood of her car for a couple reasons, one being that it didn't entirely establish their relationship right then and there anyway, and the other reason being it was a very special moment between the two of them and she simply felt like keeping it undisclosed. However, she did end up texting her about her new relationship right away after Mako left her house that last Saturday, and then discussed it again with her during band class the following Monday.

During said discussion about Ryuko and her new girlfriend, she and Nonon also mutually decided it would be fun to hang out together again, this time without all the romantic tension hanging between the her and 'the coconut head' (as Nonon so eloquently described her). Nonon also commented that it would be even more fun now because she could tease them openly, to which Ryuko responded with a not-so-gentle punch on the arm. The pink-haired girl subsequently claimed she would HAVE to, considering she'd have to put up with being the third wheel.

That specific comment had got Ryuko thinking about how she hadn't taken Mako on any dates (just the two of them) yet. This was okay, considering they had only just begun dating, but still…their first outing together as a couple was going to have Nonon on the side. Not that Nonon wasn't great; it just wasn't going to be as romantic as it could be.

Then, Ryuko felt very silly. There would be plenty of opportunities to take Mako on intimate dates in the future. She just hoped Mako would be okay with it, too. When she ended up bringing it up to the brunette at some point during the school week, she responded with her usual enthusiasm, and Ryuko was both relieved and thrilled. They set the date for that Friday, considering the didn't have a football game to perform at that week.

By the time Friday rolled around, they were very excited to be spending time with each other again outside of school. This time, they didn't go directly after school had got out; instead, the three girls all went home to get themselves more collected and prepared for a night out on the town. They didn't set a specific destination, and instead figured they'd just hang around downtown until they found something entertaining to do –and sometimes, just being downtown was exciting enough. Mako's parents even gave her some money for the outing!

Ryuko had informed the brunette that she'd be picking her up around six; this gave the smaller girl about three hours to be giddy with excitement, while primping herself up for the

event. She wanted to wear something nice –not too fancy, though- just for the occasion. Since it was still warm enough out, she eventually decided on one of her favorite sundresses: it was pastel teal in color and had white polka dots, wide shoulder straps, was mid-thigh length and hugged her waist perfectly. She paired a simple white sandal with it and topped it off with the habituated bunny necklace. Ryuko had arrived in her driveway just as she was getting in her last spritz of perfume. She quickly grabbed her phone and money.

“I’m heading out, mom!” Mako shouted as she neared the front door. “Don’t wait up!”

“Have a nice time, dear!” Her mother called in response. She exited the door and then swiftly cleared the porch.

As Mako walked down the cracked pathway to her driveway, it was as though Ryuko saw her in slow motion. Her girlfriend was *stunning*. The dress she was wearing fit her remarkably, as though it was tailored just for her, and she tried not to notice immediately the way it perked up the girl’s already large breasts. The evening wind played with her hair and the skirt of the dress as she approached the vehicle, and the dark-haired girl couldn’t take her eyes off of her if she wanted to.

When she entered the passenger’s side, Ryuko faced her immediately, spoke hastily, “I’m so glad I picked you up before Nonon,” and then seized her by the cheeks and kissed her longingly.

“Ryuko,” Mako giggled her name as they separated. Ryuko kept kissing her, though: once on her chin, then her jaw line, then onto her neck a bit fondly, to which she responded reluctantly, “Ryuko…we’re in my driveway…”

“You’re right, sorry, I just…” She said, separating herself hesitantly. “You’re just so…*wow*.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She grinned.

“You should,” Ryuko affirmed as she began to pull out of the driveway, checking her mirrors. “Honestly, I really hit the jackpot with you.”

“That’s real cheesy,” Mako said in a humored tone.

“Maybe,” She said. Then, she got to thinking about just how lucky she was that a girl like Mako had taken a liking to her. Just as an example, how had she dressed for the outing? Skinny jeans, sneakers, and a baseball tee covered by her letterman’s jacket. Essentially, like how a stereotypical lesbian might and nowhere *near* as attractively as Mako had.

As if the brunette were reading her thoughts, she spoke again, “Ryuko looks very nice, too.”

“Huh?” She responded, glancing at her briefly. “No way, this is the shit I usually wear.”

“Ryuko *always* looks nice.” Mako leaned over in her seat, tucked some of the girl’s black hair behind her ear, and then kissed her on the cheek.

“Mako,” She murmured, blushing profusely. Mako chuckled lightly and then settled back in her seat.

The drive to Nonon's was relatively short, where the drive to the downtown area was a bit longer, which was okay because Nonon had a catchy song to fill every second of travel time. Ryuko drove until she found a good spot to park in among the street parking. Once she did so, she turned off the car and faced her friends, "What do you guys wanna do first?"

"I don't know about you guys," Mako said, placing a hand on her belly. "but I'm starved."

"We could go grab a bite," Ryuko concurred.

"Yeah, I haven't eaten yet, either," Nonon chimed in from the back.

"It's settled, then." She opened her door and climbed out, and the other girls followed her lead. She briefly surveyed the nearby business and then faced them again. "Where do you wanna eat?"

"Nowhere too expense," Nonon interjected. "I don't want to blow my whole paycheck in one night."

"Yeah, me neither," Ryuko related. "Oh crap, Mako, I forgot, how much money did your parents give you?"

"Twenty dollars?" She tilted her head.

The taller teen pursed her lips slightly in thought, and then seemed to arrive at a decision. "How about I pay for your dinner then, so you don't blow that right away?"

"But Ryuko!" Mako started dramatically, "You know how much I can eat in one sitting…a-and you just said you didn't-"

"It's alright," She interrupted, smiling. "My treat, okay?"

The next expression the brunette adopted looked as though she was staring at the face of god, when in reality, she was looking at Ryuko. Nonon was fascinated by this.

As they approached the sidewalk, Mako caught up with Ryuko and then took her hand in her own, intertwining their fingers. The taller girl looked over to her in surprise, and she only smiled in return. Ryuko blushed lightly, feeling the stranger's eyes on them, and then grasped Mako's hand a bit tighter in response to any stares they might receive.

Nonon hopped over to Ryuko's other side. "Gay," She commented. Ryuko furrowed her brows at her.

Honestly, she couldn't help but notice the many stares they were accumulating; some judging, some apathetic. She knew it would be like this, and although the idea of the attention didn't faze her too much, it wasn't something she looked forward to necessarily. But then, as she looked toward Mako again -her beautiful, radiant, and care-free girlfriend, she suddenly wished more people were looking.

They eventually decided on a nearby Italian restaurant, mostly because it was close and didn't look too busy, but also because Mako looked at it rather longingly. Ryuko swore she

heard the girl's stomach growl.

She looked over to her in wonder, "Was that your stomach?"

"Yeah," She admitted somewhat shyly.

"Impressive…almost sounded like an authentic feral animal," She teased.

At this, Mako laughed openly. "Oh yeah, I've been training him," She said. Then, she grabbed at her belly and commanded, "Down, boy!"

Ryuko was very amused by this. Nonon, however, was mildly frightened –she leaned forward and spoke to the eccentric girl, "Your stomach's a 'him'?"

"Most of the time," She answered ambiguously.

The pink-haired girl shook her head, and then the three of them entered the restaurant. Thankfully, they were able to be seated immediately –neither Ryuko nor Nonon were sure how much longer Mako would last before she started gnawing on something inedible. They promptly ordered an appetizer.

The first half of the dinner's conversation was characterized by band and all topics regarding it, while Mako stayed relatively silent, almost completely indulged in her food. She had ended up ordering some fettuccine alfredo, and had quite a fun time slurping up the noodles.

The second half of the dinner's conversation came very suddenly as Nonon had finished her meal. She had been sitting on the opposite side of the both across from Mako and Ryuko, and she steepled her hands and looked intensely for a moment at the brunette. The gesture was very apparent, as Mako stared back at her with wide, confused eyes.

"Coconut head," She regarded, and Mako impulsively patted at her own hair. "When did you realize you had a crush on this here band geek?" She nodded to Ryuko across the table.

"Nonon," Ryuko spoke in a warning tone.

"What, you never asked her?" She looked toward her swiftly, and the dark-haired girl just shook her head in response. "Like you don't want to know."

Ryuko didn't have a reply to this, which was okay because Mako chimed in, "It's okay, I don't mind answering!" The taller teen looked at her in awe, and Nonon gestured for her to continue.

"I don't remember *exactly* when, but it was around the time when we had first started hanging out outside of school, ya know." She looked to her own lap. "I mean, I've thought Ryuko was pretty and nice ever since we met, but it wasn't until we really started getting to know each other that I realized that I really, really like her."

Nonon was visibly satisfied with her answer, mostly because it made Ryuko turn beet red - even though she was trying to play it off. She was hardcore averting her eyes and her lack of

response was starting to cause a lull in conversation, so Nonon spoke for her, “I can tell you exactly when Ryuko here started to develop a massive gay crush on you.”

Ryuko swiftly craned her head to give her a scolding expression, whereas Mako practically began leaning over the table. Nonon rolled her eyes at the stubborn percussionist. “Interested?”

The brunette nodded rapidly, but then looked to Ryuko in consideration. The dark-haired girl stared at the serious puppy-dog eyes she was giving her, and then she looked back toward Nonon and huffed, “Fine, go ahead.”

“Well, for the longest time, I insisted myself that she had a crush on you, just because I could tell, you know, from her body language and stuff,” She explained, and Ryuko placed an arm on the table and buried her face in it. “All she ever did was insist you were just ‘cute’ to her, until one day after one of the football games, she finally admitted it,” She reminisced. “You shoulda heard the things she said about you. If I recall correctly, she even said she was *fascinated* by you.”

“Nonon,” Ryuko spoke in a low tone, lifting her head slightly to glare at her. Mako had been staring at her girlfriend in admiration as Nonon spoke. As a largely impulsive gesture, she reached into Ryuko’s lap and scooped up her hand, and then lightly rubbed her thumb with her own. Ryuko turned her head to look at her curiously, and then down at their hands, and then finally she settled back and sat up again.

Not too long after they had all finished their respective meals and paid their bill. On the way out of the restaurant, her hand still intertwined with Mako’s, Ryuko asked, “What should we do next?”

They all thought for a moment, walking at a casual pace along the sidewalk, before Nonon spoke up, “Isn’t there a pretty cool bowling alley near here?”

“Yeah, there is!” Ryuko recalled. “That sounds like it could be fun. What do you say, Mako?”

Mako smiled at her momentarily, and then looked down. “I didn’t wear socks…”

“Oh! Uh, that’s okay, they usually sell socks next to the rental shoes just in case, right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Nonon thought. “I’m not positive, I’ve only been to this alley once.”

“We can try it!” The brunette said. “I’m not very good at bowling, but…I haven’t done it in a while, and it could be really fun with you guys.”

“That’s the spirit.” Nonon grinned.

“Wait, but what if they don’t have socks there?” Ryuko mentioned again. “Should we do something else if they don’t?”

“Nah, I could just sit out and watch you guys bowl!” Mako said nonchalantly. “Doesn’t matter much, I’ll have fun either way.” The dark-haired girl looked at her skeptically. “Really,” She reassured, squeezing her hand.

“If you’re sure…” She spoke slowly.

It took them almost another ten minutes to reach the alley, which wasn’t too bad. They could’ve taken Ryuko’s car, but it was a nice evening and they were all having a good time just walking and talking. As the sun began to set and some of the warmth left the atmosphere, Ryuko even lent Mako her letterman’s jacket. The brunette was awfully happy about this, and even snuggled against its collar.

Then, as they reached the building and were approaching the door, a certain familiar boy from their school happened to be exiting the establishment. The girls quite literally almost ran into him.

“Oh! Hey Ira, what’re you doing here?” Mako spoke first and somewhat nervously.

“Oh, hello Mako, the team was just hanging out here tonight, so I-” He stopped speaking suddenly, and then caught sight of the girl’s intertwined hands, and Ryuko’s signature jacket draped carefully over the smaller girl’s shoulders. His expression shifted from one of surprise to one of imperiousness. He chuckled briefly to himself before speaking, “I see. It all makes sense now.”

It took Ryuko a few seconds to realize the situation, to comprehend the fact that this was Ira, the football player who had asked out Mako. Sure, she’d seen him around school and sure, she’d heard his name before but she never actually put together the pieces as a whole. And now that he was standing right in front of them, speaking words, it took her even longer to understand what the guy himself was taking just from looking at them.

Even as she did begin to understand, and before she could say anything about it, the quarterback spoke again. “You rejected me because you’re gay now? I don’t buy it.”

There was an astonished moment of silence. Nonon had backed up with wide eyes, aware this wasn’t her territory or business. Mako had seemed to stop functioning completely, frozen where she stood. Ryuko, however, had seen where he was going once he set his judging eyes on the two of them.

“Of course she is,” Ryuko spat. “But she wouldn’t date your ass even if she wasn’t.” She smirked.

“There’s no way she is.” He crossed his arms. “Prove it, then.”

“P-Prove it?” The dark-haired girl stuttered, suddenly taken aback. “Why do you need proof? What makes you so sure she isn’t?”

“Because she’s a cheerleader! She’s probably never even dated a girl before. It just doesn’t make sense,” He spoke arrogantly. “Kiss her. Then maybe I’ll believe it.” Mako still remained silent, her bangs hiding her eyes as she looked toward the ground.

“Kiss her…” Ryuko comprehended quietly. Just as she looked over to Mako, the brunette slid a hand behind her neck and brought her face level with hers, and then brought her lips to her own very abruptly, full of emotion. Ryuko froze momentarily and then tilted her head slightly

to reciprocate the kiss better. It last a solid five seconds and might have lasted longer, had both of them not suddenly remembered where they were as Nonon coughed behind them.

“Damn,” the pink-haired girl commented.

Ryuko faced Ira and then cleared her throat. “How’s that for gay?”

The football player was momentarily stunned as her looked back and forth between Mako and the defiant girl glaring before him. “Whatever,” He grumbled, and then walked past them. “Have fun being lesbos.”

“We will!” Ryuko shouted after him. “What a jerk,” She commented after he was out of earshot.

Wordlessly, the three girls then entered the building. The approached the counter, and then ordered one lane for the three of them. Thankfully, the place wasn’t too busy so they got one immediately. Ryuko suggested Nonon go get the lane set up while she and Mako went to the shoe rental counter.

Once Nonon went on her way, taking the hint, Ryuko pulled Mako to the side. “Hey, are you alright? I’m sorry that had to happen, I didn’t know he was so…well, like that.”

Mako looked up at her, a touch of dolor in her eyes. “No, I’m sorry. It was my fault, anyway.” She offered a small smile. “But yeah, I’m alright.”

“Are you sure? You’re…quiet.” She said with concern, and then tilted her chin up to face her. “That wasn’t your fault at all, understand?”

Mako nodded at her slowly. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m just being silly.” She smiled at her a little more sincerely. “I’ll be fine.”

“Good.” Ryuko smiled back, and then brushed her bangs slightly to the side to kiss her forehead. “Now, let’s go see if they have some socks for you.”

Fortunately, the alley did end up selling socks at three dollars a pair, which Mako figured was fair. After collecting the necessary shoes (and socks), they began their game in a timely fashion. As it turned out, Nonon was tremendously good at bowling; despite her small stature, she had near perfect form. Surprisingly, Mako was pretty standard, getting a few spares and a couple strikes even here and there. Ryuko, however, was very poor at the game, almost constantly curving the ball and landing it in the gutter. The more she became aware of her inefficiency, the more aggressive she got with it.

While the dark-haired girl was mostly preoccupied with her own inability to knock down pins, she still couldn’t help but notice Mako wasn’t as peppy as she usually was. Obviously, she suspected it still had to do with their earlier run-in. Then, she got an idea; while Nonon was taking her turn, making a small deal of showing off, Ryuko sat down next to the brunette and smiled over at her.

“I have an idea. Wanna hear it?” Mako nodded at her, curious. “How about…after we’re done here, instead of dropping you off at home, I take you back home with me?” She proposed leisurely.

The smaller girl’s eyes lit up, and then she immediately deflated again. “That sounds really good, but…I-I don’t have anything with me…”

Ryuko blinked at her, realizing the dilemma. “I wouldn’t have any problem taking you by your place real quick to grab a few things, if you need. Really, it’s no big deal.”

Mako smiled at her willingness. “Okay,” She agreed warmly. “I’ll text my parents and make sure it’s alright.”

Ryuko couldn’t contain her grin as she patted her knee and then got up to take her turn, finally hitting more than two pins this time.

When the game ended, Nonon had unsurprisingly surfaced as the victor, about thirty points higher than Mako’s score, which was second highest. Ryuko said all that mattered was that they had a good time, even if she might’ve been gritting her teeth while saying so. It was almost nine by the time they left the alley, and Mako’s parents had given her the okay to stay the night, so they were all good to go.

On their drive back toward Nonon’s house first, they rolled down the windows and played a song they all agreed they knew the words to, and they sang. They sang loudly, out of tune and slightly off-key, but that was okay because all they needed was for the crisp nighttime air to know that they were living.

After Nonon had departed with a friendly goodbye and the instruction for the two of them to ‘not have too much fun’, they were off to Mako’s for her to collect some overnight items.

Once inside her house again, Mako wasn’t sure what to grab. It had been ages since she’d last spent the night anywhere else besides her own room, let alone her girlfriend’s house. She first decided on pajamas –some comfy drawstring shorts and a cotton tee. Then, she figured she needed her deodorant, her toothbrush, some undies, and a casual outfit for the next day. As she scanned her room for anything else she could possibly need, she spotted her stuffed animals atop her pillows and couldn’t resist –she grabbed three of them and stuffed them into her bag. Finally, she fast-walked back downstairs and out the door to Ryuko’s car.

“All set?” The older teen asked as she shut the door.

“Yep!” She confirmed, hugging her bag to her chest.

“Alright,” She said under her breath, pulling out of her driveway.

When they arrived back at her house, Mako immediately exited the car and went into the house because she knew the way. Ryuko shook her head at her antics, and then too got out of the car and followed her trail. As she stepped into her bedroom, she found exactly what she expected: Mako face-down on top of her bed, all her limbs spread out like she was giving the mattress a big hug.

Ryuko kicked off her sneakers and set her keys on the table, and then joined Mako on the bed where she could find room around her. She sat next to her, drawing her knees to her chest. There was an odd silence between them before the dark-haired girl got bored with her unresponsiveness and poked her playfully on her side. The girl twitched a little, and then her chest heaved visibly.

“Mako?” Ryuko spoke, tilting her head in concern.

Mako sniffled, and the let out a slightly-muffled squeak.

“Mako,” She said a little more firmly this time, placing a careful hand on her back and shaking her a little. In response, the smaller girl curled up in the opposite direction of Ryuko and then sniffled again.

“Mako…” She whispered this time. “Is something the matter?” She noticed her head move up and down marginally in response.

“Oh…” Ryuko spoke, her heart beating a bit harder. She adjusted the way she was sitting, moving her legs to cross one another. “Is it about what happened earlier?”

This time, the girl’s nod was much more distinct, and she very suddenly rolled over onto her other side and landed her head in the taller girl’s lap. She reached over and wrapped one of her arms around Ryuko’s waist and then let out one of the most heartbreaking sobs the girl had ever heard.

For a moment, Ryuko didn’t say anything. She simply let her cry, and cry openly. There were times where a person just needed to let it out. Besides, she was scared that if she spoke, her own voice would crack; the way Mako wailed cut through to her heart more deeply than anything she could recall. Even though she was unsure about the reason for her sobs, she felt a certain level of emotional agony in response to Mako’s pain.

After just a couple of minutes, her crying had been reduced to sniffles once more, and it seemed the storm was over. Mako flipped onto her back and looked up to Ryuko, who just looked down at her, and then moved her hand to brush the girl’s bangs out of her face. The brunette closed her eyes and nuzzled against her hand.

Ryuko then continued to run her fingers through her hair, brushing her fingertips along her scalp. “Do you want to talk about it?” She asked very quietly.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.” Mako sniffled. “It’s…obviously about what happened with Ira today. So much of it, just…really hurt. It hurt because I wanted to be his friend. He used to be cool when I hung out with him and some of his old friends in middle school, and I thought it would be fun to catch up.” She sighed. “I guess he just got really hung up on me, which sucks.”

Ryuko nodded supportively, and continued to massage her scalp. “But what hurt the most was the things he said,” She explained next. “The stuff about me being gay. How there’s no way I could be gay, because I’m a cheerleader.”

“That was total bullshit,” She commented. “Like you cheerleading holds any bearing on that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not the only one who thinks that way,” She said, sounding like she was choking back a sob. “All my life, I’ve grown up to do stereotypically popular girl things, I guess you could call them. I was in gymnastics, and then I went onto cheerleading. I’ve always dressed very girly, and acted very girly. Apparently, to most people that means I can’t also like girls?” She pouted. “No, I’ve never dated any girls –well, before you of course, but I’ve never dated any guys, either.”

“Mako, that’s…that’s terrible,” Ryuko commented genuinely. “I don’t mean to detract from your experience by saying this, but, I guess I never really thought about that. I mean, in my experience, no one was surprised to find out I’m gay. I was never offended by that, because I’m completely comfortable with who I am, but...even at a young age, I was called names for it,” She told. “I guess there are many ways to experience discrimination based on sexuality.”

“Yeah,” Mako acknowledged with another sniffle. “It’s just really exhausting, you know? When your peers –your parents, even- always ask about a boyfriend who will never be in the picture, and even though they mean well, it just leaves you feeling…unnatural. Wrong, even, like you’ll never quite…never quite…” She couldn’t help but let out another sob, the tears beginning again. “fit in.”

“Mako…” Ryuko spoke with concern, removing her hand from her hair and brushing her fingers along her damp cheek. “Mako, could you sit up for me? Please?”

Mako did so slowly, sitting across from her and taking her time crossing her legs, keeping her head down and her hair hiding her face so Ryuko didn’t have to see her reddening eyes. Ryuko, however, reached over and tucked the right side of her hair behind her ear, bringing the same hand to lightly trace her jawline and tilt her face upward to look at her.

“Mako, you’re…astounding. I’m not sure where to begin with this, or how cheesy this is about to be, but…” She wiped away one of the girl’s stray tears with the pad of her thumb. “You’re really something else. You’re hilarious, talented, intuitive, and quirky…you get into people’s hearts very easily. As well as their minds, it seems. Hell, you stole my heart within a month of me meeting you. Not to mention you’re absolutely beautiful, it’s really no wonder you’re a varsity cheerleader.”

Ryuko smiled as she noticed the girl’s blush, and then continued. “Maybe it’s still a sore subject, but…when I thought you were dating Ira, I was completely torn up. And me, being as clueless as I am with these things, couldn’t for the life of me figure out why I felt the way I did. I was extremely *jealous* of this guy I’d never even met, and every time I was around you when I was under the impression you were taken by this guy, I couldn’t help but wonder if he knew how lucky he was.”

She swallowed, and then attempted to control the emotion in her voice. “It might be soon to say this, and maybe I’m just a bit ridiculous for it, but damn it, Mako…” She rubbed her cheek with her thumb. “Mako, I love you.”

“Ryuko…” Mako muttered, her voice not really coming out as she stared right back at her. Her heart had gone heavy, and her brain had fizzled into mush, but she still managed to speak, “Whenever I see you, I get all these little butterflies in my tummy, and you make me wanna smile a whole lot, all the time…” She tried to explain.

“I-I guess what I’m trying to say here is-” She was interrupted with a tender kiss on her parted lips, causing her to melt like putty in Ryuko’s palms. Per usual, it took her couple seconds to begin to return the kiss. Then, Ryuko pulled back slightly and leaned her forehead against hers.

Mako opened her mouth, “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

I promise I am exhausted of demonizing Ira. Believe it or not, I actually like his character. Most of the time. I'll try not to do it again.

But yeah, that was essentially the end of the story!! I really hope you all enjoyed it...it only took me a month to do. Please leave feedback!

The next chapter after this is 100% OPTIONAL TO READ...it is not pertinent to the plot in the slightest and does not affect it. It is extremely indulgent smut. That being said, it is EXPLICIT, so if you're not comfortable with that, don't read it!

Chapter 14: Optional Pajamas

Chapter Notes

> Just a reminder -this is the EXPLICIT chapter. As in, I've made Ryuko and Mako have SEX WITH EACH OTHER. I'm not going to change the rating on the entire fic because of it.
>
> If you don't like that for whatever reason, this is your warning.

“I love you, too.”

Ryuko grinned like a dork, and then impulsively kissed her again on her mouth, then the side of it, then her cheek, and soon enough she was sprinkling kisses all over the girl’s face, causing those bubbly giggles to rise from her throat again. Eventually, she met her eyes again, sighed, and said, “I’m glad.”

Mako still wore a smile as she reconnected their lips, pressing them together sweetly, causing Ryuko to hum. She continued to work her lips against hers steadily, and the dark-haired girl was curious to see just how much initiative she was going to take, so she let her lead.

The brunette wrapped one of her hands around the side of her neck, and then tilted her head to deepen their kiss, gently slipping her tongue between her lips and into her awaiting mouth. Ryuko moaned slightly at this, further encouraging her to slide her tongue gently along hers. Mako then pushed her own tongue underneath hers, licking smoothly along the underside of the muscle.

The dark-haired girl gripped her head with both of her hands, as if to bring her closer. She slowly straightened out her legs, untangling them from the way they were crossed. Mako took the opportunity to scoot closer to her, and then she brought her own legs to either side of the girl’s hips.

Ryuko leaned back against her few pillows, and let the girl lean against her considerably, their tongues wrapping around one another lazily. After a few more moments of this, however, Mako broke away and caught her breath. “Ryuko,” She breathed. “Is your dad still gone?”

“Yep,” She said distractedly, pecking at her lips.

“Good…” Mako whispered. Then, Ryuko kissed her chin and continued to progress with her movements, kissing over her jaw and onto her neck, eventually kissing over her throat. She slowed down the succession there, and the boldly peeked her tongue from her lips, pressing the tip of it to her soft skin with each new kiss.

“Ryuko,” She spoke again, this time in more of a moan. “You’re making me real hot…”

Ryuko had frozen as she heard Mako speak again. Instead of replying with speech, she responded to her statement by trailing her tongue from the base of her throat to her jaw, causing the girl to gasp audibly and then for her hips to twitch. This was exactly the reaction she was hoping for; she gripped Mako tightly by her waist and then gently coaxed her from straddling her to lying down on the mattress against her pillows, this time Ryuko hovering over her.

Once readjusted, the dark-haired girl got right back to tonguing at the girl’s neck, causing her to whine. She kissed at her soft skin leisurely, relishing in the feeling and the noises she was making. The brunette reached up and wove her fingers into Ryuko’s hair, and then tugged on it gently as the sensation really began to affect her. In response to this, Ryuko trailed her lips down to her collarbone and began sucking on her skin experimentally, darting her eyes up to the girl’s face to see her reaction; she was practically panting, her eyebrows drawn together.

The dark-haired girl followed along her collarbone until she was met with a silver chain. She’d almost forgotten she was wearing the necklace. Cautiously, she snaked her hands behind Mako’s neck and undid the clasp to it, removing it from her neck and sitting up momentarily to place it on her nightstand.

“Ryuko,” Mako spoke from below her, looking up at her and breathing deeply. “Are we going to…do it?”

Ryuko chuckled at this and at her mannerisms in general. She leaned back over her on her elbows, pressing her lips to hers briefly. “Did you want to?” She spoke against her mouth.

The smaller girl’s cheeks colored again, but nevertheless she answered, “Yeah…”

“I’m glad, because…shit, Mako, you’re really hot,” She breathed playfully, bringing her lips from the other girl’s over to her ear. “And you’re really cute when you’re turned on,” She husked, and then dragged her tongue along the shell of her ear.

Mako had never felt quite so lightheaded. Ryuko’s touches and kisses almost made her forget where she was, even; everything at the forefront of her consciousness was consumed by all that was her girlfriend, who had just confessed she had feelings for her…the girl was in heaven. The dark-haired girl currently had her earlobe between her lips, and then she licked up her ear again, this time slower. In reaction to this, Mako released a desperate noise so passionate she didn’t even realize it was her who had made the noise at first. Then, her hips subconsciously twitched towards the girl above her.

“Holy shit, Mako…” Ryuko bit her lip and then lowered herself just a bit onto her, just so that their bodies were lightly against one another. She reveled in the closeness, the feeling of Mako pressed underneath her. This time, Ryuko slid her tongue through the brunette’s slightly parted lips. They remained like that for just a bit, hands on each other’s bodies, just enjoying experiencing one another.

Then, Ryuko sat up on her hips again, not breaking eye contact with the girl below her for a second as she grabbed the hem of her own shirt and began to pull it upward. Mako just stared

up at her with wide eyes, partially biting her bottom lip in anticipation. The dark-haired girl eventually got the shirt off over her head and over the side of the bed, leaving her in just her black bra and skinny jeans. She then arched her back and reached behind herself to undo the bra clasp, and in just a few more seconds it was on the floor as well.

“Oh my god…” Mako muttered as she placed her hands on the dark-haired girl’s hips, gradually sliding them up her torso, higher and higher before she reached her exposed breasts. They were warm and soft, and Ryuko couldn’t help but toss her head back a bit as the smaller girl began to massage them. She let out a broken moan at the feeling; Mako was still incredibly good with her hands.

“Mako,” Ryuko spoke lowly and, after a minute or so of this, began subtly moving her hips against hers. She leaned back down over her and then promptly grabbed Mako’s breasts over her dress, immediately causing Mako to drop her own hands in relative surprise. She had never had her own breasts touched and, even though it was over fabric, it felt incredible.

However, this didn’t last long before she leaned in real close and asked Mako to lift up her back a little, and she did, allowing for Ryuko to reach underneath her and unzip her dress. Once she did so successfully, she pushed the thick straps off of her shoulders and down her arms, pulling the dress down her torso inch by inch, just to reveal that the brunette hadn’t been wearing any sort of bra. She didn’t even bother taking the dress the rest of the way off once she had revealed her chest.

Ryuko was impressed by what she saw, to say the least. Mako had a very full, plump set of breasts; the older teen was almost overwhelmed. She palmed the weight of one of them in her right hand, almost as if to get a feel for them -a better understanding of them. She almost seemed to be inspecting them.

“They’re not going to bite you, you know,” The brunette giggled.

Ryuko looked up at her, and then smiled, realizing she might’ve looked odd. “That would be even more impressive.”

The girl continued to giggle, “Yeah…o-oh…” She was interrupted as she felt the other girl’s warm, wet mouth cover one of her nipples. “*Oh*…”

“Mmm…” Ryuko hummed as she sucked on her, the other breast still in her right hand, her thumb cautiously brushing over her nipple. She swirled her tongue around the now stiff left nipple, flicking its tip with just the end of her tongue. Then, she alternated the actions, Mako occasionally squeaking below her.

She sat up again, her hands still on her breasts, kneading them generously. “Mako, would it be alright if I took off the rest of your dress now?”

She lifted her eyebrows at her. “Does that mean you’ll have to stop touching my boobs?”

Ryuko grinned. “Yeah, but…I might do something you’ll like even more,” She spoke, the words rolling out of her mouth like honey.

Mako gazed right up at her, swallowed, and then nodded slowly. “Yeah,” She said. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

The taller girl wasted no time in scooting down her body, her hands moving from her breasts and down her body in the process. She tugged the skirt of the dress out from under her, gathering the fabric in her grip and pulling it upward. She got it up her torso before she said, “Arms,” signaling Mako to lift them. Soon enough, the dress joined the other discarded articles of clothing.

Ryuko was slightly in awe as she sat at her thighs. Mako only wore her panties under her dress, so that’s all she had on at the moment. The panties themselves were really cute: pure white with lace covering the front, and two little pink satin bows on the hips. The brunette felt her heart racing as Ryuko sat there and looked her over, nervous as to what she might think of her.

Then, Ryuko looked up to her face to see the evident worry in her eyes. She crawled back up her body, gazing into her eyes, and then kissed her lips tenderly. “Mako, you’re…absolutely stunning,” She told her sincerely. “And your panties are adorable. Is all your underwear this nice?”

“No…I wore these ones tonight because I wanted to feel confident,” She admitted.

“Mako,” Ryuko murmured, burying her face in the girl’s neck. “You are *so* cute.” She started lazily kissing her skin again, this time trailing one of her hands down her torso and to the waistband of her panties. She stuck a thumb under the elastic, just playing with the fabric.

After a few moments of just this, Ryuko felt Mako’s hands on her hips, snaking around to the front of her torso moderately. Then, she felt her fingertips slip under the waistband of her jeans, quickly locating the button of her pants. From there, she undid the button and pulled down the zipper. The taller girl had since removed her lips from her neck and brought her forehead to hers again.

“Take them off,” Mako breathed. Ryuko blinked at her and then bit her own bottom lip slightly, moving her hand from Mako’s waistband to her own, and then removed the jeans with considerable difficulty. Once they were off, however, she returned to her position on top of her. As she repositioned herself, both of them now only in their panties, Mako put her hand behind the girl’s neck and brought her lips to her own again, immediately sliding their tongues to meet halfway.

Ryuko felt herself become even more aroused at her sudden streak of initiative, and couldn’t help but press her hips to the other girl’s, and began thrusting against her tentatively. In response to this, she received a needy moan straight into her mouth, and continued her movements. The kiss quickly became more fevered, the younger teen working her tongue against hers intensely.

The taller girl angled her hips a bit better against hers and began moving with a bit more certainty. Mako whined again, and then suddenly broke the kiss. She stuck her fingers under the waistband of Ryuko’s underwear without warning, and began tugging at them. “Off…off please,” She insisted without much voice. Ryuko then aided her in taking off her panties, and

the second that was out of the way, the shorter girl hooked her fingers around her own panties, lifted her own hips, and tugged them down her own legs.

They both took a moment to breathe, gazing at each other intensely. Then, Ryuko's eyes darted down Mako's body again. "You shave?" She observed.

"Mhm," The brunette swallowed, and then looked in the same direction. Then, she smiled. "Aw, you have a cute little landing strip! I should've guessed, that's so like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ryuko blushed. Instead of answering her, Mako brought her hand south to touch the hair. "M-Mako…" She gasped, her eyes widening. Mako, enjoying this reaction, slid her fingertips just a bit further and dipped them into her sex briefly. As quickly as she put her hand there, she took it back.

"You're soaked," She commented, bringing the fingers to her mouth. "Good." She then licked what fluid had gathered on them.

"Mako, holy *shit*," Ryuko spoke as she quickly slid her tongue into her mouth again, feeling incredibly turned on; she couldn't remember a time she'd ever felt quite as aroused as she did then.

Next, the taller girl moved her left leg to be placed between Mako's, and then lifted up the other girl's right leg slightly, holding it up by the thigh. Ryuko was incredibly grateful for the girl's astounding flexibility. She took one last look into Mako's brown and hazy eyes for reassurance, and the brunette nodded readily.

Finally, she pressed herself between Mako's thighs, and then delicately touched their sexes together. Immediately, she started moving against her at a steady pace, eager to feel her warmth against her.

Ryuko legitimately felt like she might pass out. Now, she could confirm for herself that every inch of Mako was indeed ridiculously soft. "Mako, *fuck*," She uttered, knowing she was not going to last long like this.

Just as she had that thought, Mako started putting more effort into grinding against her as well. Soon enough, they had set a decent pace, their hips rolling together almost perfectly in sync. The brunette's breathing was audibly staggered as she whined between breaths, and Ryuko groaned.

Then, the taller girl leaned more into her, pressing her body more firmly against the girl below her. She slowly let go of her leg, and Mako was able to keep it up on her own, and then even wrapped it around the other girl's waist. The process changed the angle of her thrusting just slightly, and now she was continuously rubbing over both of their sweet spots with considerable pressure.

"Ryuko, y-yes!" Mako gasped, her hands gripping tightly onto her back. As Ryuko slowed down her grinding just a bit so that she could focus on intensity, the brunette's fingernails unintentionally dug into the taller girl's shoulder blades, causing her to inhale sharply.

“Sorry!” The shorter girl yelped. “Did I scratch you?”

“Yeah, but it was *really* good…” She spoke, practically growling. “Do it again…”

Mako was unsure, but then Ryuko delivered a particularly indulgent thrust, and she did it again (but not entirely on purpose), this time dragging her nails a bit further down her shoulder blades as she whined with pleasure. The dark-haired girl groaned and dipped her head again, her forehead lightly touching the other girl’s.

A few uncharacteristically erratic movements later, Ryuko opened her eyes to look at the girl below her and she moaned, “Mako, I’m gonna *cum*…”

“Mmn…R-Ryuko yes, I-” The girl muttered almost incoherently, twitched, and then, “A-*Ah*!” came with a gasp.

“Fuck! Mak-Mako…” She uttered as she climaxed as well, curling her toes into her sheets.

Instead of collapsing on top of her, she fell to her side and landed on her back, staring at the ceiling and trying to catch her breath. “Holy shit,” She spoke, winded. Mako turned onto her side to face her, wrapping her arm around her torso and snuggling against her. Ryuko reached her arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, and they stayed just like that in silence for a few moments, heart beats echoing in their ears.

“Ryuko, I…” Mako broke the silence, catching Ryuko’s attention. “I wanna make you feel good…”

The dark-haired girl smiled at her and squeezed her shoulder. “You just did.”

“No, I mean,” She began again, getting up on her hands and knees and climbing over Ryuko. She looked directly into her eyes, “*I*…want to make *you*…feel good.”

The older teen searched her eyes, still not sure exactly what she meant. Regardless, she didn’t ask questions when the girl suddenly pressed her lips to her jawline, the tip of her tongue peeking out to meet her skin. Ryuko went very still, letting her do what she may, sighing as she felt her skin tingle.

Ryuko’s skin was a little salty, Mako noticed. Not in a bad way, though; the girl was covered in a thin layer of sweat, as was to be expected. Oddly enough, this only served to further heighten her lust. This being said, the girl was working in the heat of the moment, eager to move down her body.

She spent about a minute or so playing with Ryuko’s breasts, massaging them again and squishing them together. The older girl made some whimpering noises whenever her tongue grazed her nipple, so she was sure to do that more than a few times. Eventually, she was squirming underneath her, pushing forth her chest. Mako kissed her sternum sweetly and then returned to her mission south.

The brunette trailed shorter, lighter kisses down her ribcage and over her stomach, stopping at her belly button and looking up at her girlfriend just to see her staring right back at her. Then,

she kept her eyes on her, raised her eyebrows, and then dipped her tongue into her belly button like a lizard. Ryuko cracked a smile, and Mako did it a couple more times until the other girl bent forward a bit in laughter, insisting she was ticklish.

Mako then pushed Ryuko's thighs a bit further apart as she fit herself between them, her lips now at her hips as she gripped her thighs in her hands. She traced her hipbones with the tip of her tongue, both of them respectively. Then, she continued her kissing expedition lower and lower until she was kissing at her pubic bone, and finally the landing strip she was so amused by.

Ryuko was shaking visibly and her breathing was audible. Mako then looked up at her again and established eye contact as she dipped her tongue into her slit, causing the dark-haired girl to toss her head back among the pillows. The brunette then went for it, unsure of what she was doing exactly.

She lapped at her repeatedly and rapidly, trying her best to solicit more noises from her girlfriend. She looked up from between the girl's legs to see her chest rising and falling intermittently, and then she watched one of her hands move from gripping the sheets to tucking some of her chestnut hair behind her ear.

"Mako," Ryuko spoke, trying to steady her voice and staring down at her with her eyebrows drawn together. The brunette halted her tongue for a second. She took a few more breaths before speaking again, "Take it easy, alright? It's not a race…" She tucked a few more loose strands of hair behind the girl's ear. "Just…take it slow…"

Mako's eyebrows came together in determination, and she took her tongue and started at the base of Ryuko's sex and then slowly dragged it up, lingering for a second on her clit, and not breaking eye contact with her for a second. "Yeah, that's...*fuck*..." Ryuko's eyebrows drew closer again and her jaw went slack as her head returned to the pillows, her back arching slightly.

The brunette took this as a good sign, and did the exact same thing again, and then again, and once more with a little more pace. Then, she covered her sex with her hot, open mouth and pressed her tongue deep into her folds. Ryuko convulsed shortly and then looked back down at her, just to see her amber eyes gazing back up at her. While the smaller teen had her visual attention, she lifted her tongue from her wetness, a string of saliva and the girl's juices connecting her to her sex. Ryuko made a pitched noise at the sight and then bit her lip, hard.

Mako was amused by this, and momentarily removed her mouth from her to bring one of her own hands over to position her index and middle fingers on each of Ryuko's labia, effectively spreading her out. Ryuko felt her do this, and kept her eyes on her curiously. The shorter girl studied her exposed sex for a moment, and then premeditatedly licked her again, closing her eyes and keeping her spread with her fingers.

As she opened her eyes again, she saw Ryuko's vision had returned to the ceiling. As she was looking away, Mako looked down at her slit again. Then, she giggled lightly. "Your clitoris twitched." The taller girl's chest heaved again, and she offered a broken moan, but she didn't look down. "It was cute," She said in a smaller voice, and then dipped her head down again

tongued at the nub lightly. At this action, Ryuko's fingers weaved deeper into her chestnut hair, gripping it cautiously.

"Mmm…" Mako hummed dreamily as she widened her tongue to encompass her sex again, dragging the muscle up and down until she was sure Ryuko was panting. Then, she wrapped her tongue around her clit, nudging it gently, just rubbing at it almost casually. Finally, she closed her lips around the nub, and sucked at it experimentally.

Ryuko gasped loudly and her grip on her hair suddenly got much tighter. "Mako," She groaned. "Mako, oh my *god*, don't stop…" She spoke with a dry throat. Mako *didn't* stop; she sucked even harder, her tongue still pressed to the sensitive flesh. She pressed her mouth even closer to her body somehow, angled her jaw just a little, and then hummed again.

The dark-haired girl seemed to choke on her own voice as she came, and came *hard*; she rolled her hips up into Mako's mouth, her hand keeping a death-grip on her head so the girl didn't move from her position during her climax. Her voice eventually did return to her, though, and what followed was the highest-pitched noise Mako had ever heard her make.

Once she was absolutely positive she was finished, she crawled back over her. Ryuko noticed this despite her currently hazy brain, and instantly wrapped her arms around the brunette, effectively slamming her body down against her own. "Mako, I *love* you," She rasped.

"Just because I made you cum?" She propped her chin on her sternum with a pout.

Ryuko chuckled breathily. "Do we have to go through this again?"

"No," Mako laughed as well. "I love you, too," She returned sweetly. "And I'm glad your dad's not home."

She laughed at the comment briefly, and then there was a moment of comfortable silence between them as Ryuko's mind became less cloudy and as her breathing return to normal. They both just laid there naked for a bit, fitting together nicely even despite the slightly awkward position Mako was in.

Then, Mako broke the silence. "I should probably put on my jammies now."

Ryuko looked down at her again, smiling. "Do you have to?"

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